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W. B. YEATS

A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

FORREST REID

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NOTE

In writing this essay I have had the different editions of Mr. Yeats's works before me. Where the texts have been revised I have always quoted from the last version, save in the cases of *The Secret Rose*, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, and *The Shadowy Waters*. In these three instances I have chosen an earlier version, and have explained my reasons for doing so in the text. I have to thank Mrs. Tynan Hinkson for her kindness in allowing me to make use of her *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences*, and Mr. A. H. Bullen and Mr. Elkin Mathews for their courtesy in giving me permission to quote whatever I desired from those works of Mr. Yeats which they publish. From Mr. Fisher Unwin I have purchased a similar privilege in regard to two or three lyrics, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, and *The Wanderings of Usheen*, published by him in the volume called *Poems* by W. B. Yeats.

TO

BASIL DE SELINCOURT

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"'The worship of God is, honouring His gifts in other men each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best. Those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God.'

The Angel hearing this became almost blue, but mastering himself he grew yellow, and at last white-pink and smiling."

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

I

EARLY POEMS

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, the eldest son of Mr. J. B. Yeats, R.H.A., the well-known artist, was born at Sandymount, Dublin, on the 13th of June, 1865. His paternal grandfather was William Butler Yeats, M.A., Rector of Tullylish, Co. Down; his maternal grandfather was William Pollexfen, merchant and shipowner, Sligo. At the age of nine he went to London, where his parents then lived, and received his first education at Godolphin School, Hammersmith. When he was fifteen he was sent to the Erasmus Smith School, Dublin. His grandparents lived in Sligo, (and it is the Sligo country that forms the background of all his early work, both in prose and verse.) The town of Ballah, which he writes of in *John Sherman*, is the town of Sligo; a town of "grey streets," "of narrow roads and mean little shops," "full enough in summer of trout and salmon fishers," but sleeping "all winter like the bears." Mr. Yeats's love of Sligo is very vividly expressed in this book, written when,

like his hero, he was an exile in London. "As he went through the streets his heart went out to every familiar place and sight: the rows of tumble-down thatched cottages; the slated roofs of the shops; the women selling gooseberries; the river bridge; the high walls of the garden where it was said the gardener used to see the ghost of a former owner in the shape of a rabbit; the street corner no child would pass at nightfall for fear of the headless soldier; the deserted flour store; the wharves covered with grass." "Grey clouds covering the town with flying shadows rushed by like the old and dishevelled eagles that Maeldune saw hurrying towards the waters of life. Below in the street passed by country people, townspeople, travellers, women with baskets, boys driving donkeys, old men with sticks; sometimes he recognized a face or was recognized himself, and welcomed by some familiar voice."[1]

And in *The Celtic Twilight*, in some of the early poems, Mr. Yeats has described the Sligo country with the same affectionate fidelity that in *John Sherman* marks his description of the town. There, in Lough Gill, is the Island of Innisfree—Rat Island—a beautiful spot, and there it is that

[1] *John Sherman*, pp. 88–90.

the wave of moonlight glosses,
The dim gray sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses. . . .

The woodland scenery of his later poems is taken from the country round about Coole; but Drumcliff and Rosses, with their sand and rocks and sea and grass, are the haunted places whose beauty he has woven into those lyrics of his youth, which are dearer to many people than anything he wrote in after years. To the actual circumstances and adventures of his childhood and boyhood Mr. Yeats makes few, if any, direct allusions in his published writings. We must wait for these particular chapters in autobiography till his new book, which is to deal with this period of his life and is promised for next autumn, appears. In the meantime, we have very little to go upon save that most charming and gracious volume by Mrs. Tynan Hinkson, Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences. All through his school-days and afterwards, Katharine Tynan thinks, "he must have suffered from being unlike his fellows: a white blackbird among the others, a genius among the commonplace. He had a schoolmaster in his Dublin days who wrote very bad and very pretentious verse himself. . . . He liked to ridicule the young poet because of whom he may one day be remem-

bered. The schoolboys grinned at the poet's halting translations. If ragging, in its material sense, had been the fashion at Irish schools, it would have been harder for him."[1]

But he was twenty years old when Mrs. Hinkson first met him, and though still an art student, had already written a great deal of verse. *The Island of Statues*, his first published poem, appeared in the Dublin University Review when he was nineteen. Mr. Yeats has described how it was something more than a personal ambition that led him to write, that "plucked him out of the Dublin art schools where he should have stayed drawing from the round, and sent him into a library to read bad translations from the Irish, and at last down into Connaught to sit by turf fires."[2] His dream was of nothing less than the creation of a whole literature for Ireland. In that dream lay the seeds of the modern Irish Movement, and though the idea of founding a national drama was still remote, it, too, was but a development of this ambition of a boy of twenty. One gathers that it was a time of great enthusiasms, of the founding of many societies that were chiefly, however, political in their aims. Mr. Yeats himself, as he has

[1] *Twenty-five Years*, p. 144.
[2] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 3–4.

told us, was working for a romantic, or ideal Ireland—the Nationalism of O'Leary and of John F. Taylor. "All the while I worked with this idea, founding societies that became quickly or slowly everything I despise. One part of me looked on, mischievous and mocking, and the other part spoke words which were more and more unreal, as the attitude of mind became more and more strained and difficult."[1] But in 1890 he had been able to write, "A true literary consciousness—national to the centre—seems gradually to be forming out of all this disguising and prettyfying, this penumbra of half-culture. We are preparing likely enough for a new Irish literary movement—like that of '48—that will show itself in the first lull in politics." The lull in politics has not yet come, and seems at present farther off than ever. But we must return to our chronicle.

Simultaneously with this sweeping of the way for the triumphal entrance of a new poetic literature Mr. Yeats was busy in other directions. Under the guidance of Mr. Charles Johnston he had been drawn to the study of Theosophy, and a young Brahmin had actually been invited to come from London to Ireland

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. viii, p. 97.

to teach these astonishing students his philosophy. What may doubtless appear more surprising, and, indeed, rather charming, is that the young Brahmin accepted the invitation. He came, "with a little bag in his hand and Marius the Epicurean in his pocket, and stayed with one of us, who gave him a plate of rice and an apple every day at two o'clock; and for a week and all day long he unfolded what seemed to be all wisdom. . . ."[1] "Alcibiades," Mr. Yeats goes on, "fled from Socrates lest he might do nothing but listen to him all life long, and I am certain that we, seeking as youth will for some unknown deed and thought, all dreamed that but to listen to this man who threw the enchantment of power about simple and gentle things, and at last to think as he did, was the one thing worth doing and thinking; and that all action and all words that lead to action were a little vulgar, a little trivial. Ah, how many years it has taken me to awaken out of that dream!"[2]

Katharine Tynan, in the work I have before alluded to, gives so delicate and felicitous a portrait of the particular pupil who is the subject of this essay that I cannot refrain from quoting it.

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. viii, p. 191.
[2] *Ibid.*, 196.

Willie Yeats was at that time of our first meeting . . . tall and lanky . . . beautiful to look at with his dark face, its touch of vivid colouring, the night-black hair, the eager dark eyes. . . . At that time he was all dreams and all gentleness. . . . Certainly he had not a trace of bitterness when I first knew him, nor for long afterwards. . . . Willie Yeats was always about the studio. . . . He used to be very quiet in a corner doing some work of his own, and ever willing to do anything he was asked to do for others. He was very gentle, simple, and generous. He asked you to be profoundly interested in his poetry. On the other hand, he was always profoundly interested in yours. He would read his poetry to you for hours, if you would allow it; on the other hand, he would listen for hours, absorbed in yours, if you chose to absorb him. . . . If you brought him a new poem he would chant it over to himself with his head on one side. Nearly always one was surprised by the generosity of his admiration. . . .

Occasionally I stayed the night at the Yeatses' house on the outskirts of Dublin. I used to be awakened in the night by a steady, monotonous sound rising and falling. It was Willie chanting poetry to himself in the watches of the night.

He never had the remotest idea of taking care of himself. He would go all day without food unless someone remembered it for him, and in the same way would go on eating unless someone checked him. . . . Once he had a very bad cough. . . . I was sorry for him, and I bestowed upon him some cough lozenges which contained opium or chlorodyne

or both, with instructions to suck one two or three times a day. He ate through the whole box at a sitting, and thereafter slept for some thirty hours. . . .

There were moments when poetry ceased to charm others, but never him. He was always ready to squire me anywhere I would. I remember one very wet night, after we had been to a meeting of the Protestant Home Rule Association, when we waited in Westmoreland Street for a tram; I in my smart clothes, my high-heeled French shoes, standing in a pool of water; the wind driving the rain as it does only in a sea-bound city; Willie holding the umbrella at an acute and absent-minded angle which could shelter nobody, pouring the while into my ears *The Sensitive Plant.* It was a moment to try any woman's temper. . . .

During the winter of 1886–7, I had seen a great deal of Willie Yeats. . . . Looking back, it seems to me that there was something almost pathetic about him. He was so gentle, so eager to do what one wanted, so patient when one drove him hither and thither. He was made happy by so little kindness. . . . He was most adaptable in a household; for he never cared what he ate or drank, or in what corner he slept, nor what he did for the matter of that, so long as there was someone to talk poetry with him. When he stayed with us and wanted to go to town, he was quite ready to take a seat with Tommy Merrigan, who drove a milk-van into town. The spectacle of the poet sitting up among the milk-cans is a weird one in my memory. Other young gentlemen occasionally accepted a seat in the milk-van,

taking care to get off before they reached the parts of the city that counted. Not so the poet, who would drive through the smartest streets in the milk-van, unconscious or careless that it differed from the finest carriage. To be sure, Tommy Merrigan was a congenial companion. There was not a hedge nor a bush that had not its phantom for him. An amiable black dog, seen in the twilight, became the most horrible of Celtic evil spirits in his imagination.

The poet used to come into my little sitting-room, where I sat at my desk with my back to the fire. . . . He used to go down to the kitchen for the cat. As her presence annoyed my St. Bernard . . . I vaguely resented it. The poet used to talk half-humorously to the cat. . . . These distractions used to annoy me. . . . Sometimes I got rid of him by sending him to post my letters, while I did something which needed freedom from distraction. . . . He used to go off swinging an immense market-basket, with perhaps a solitary letter flying up and down in it, like the pea in the bladder. I used to tie down the market-basket so that he should not lose the letter. He went out through the milking-shed for a short cut. The men, milking by candle-light, would see him flit by like the *Flying Dutchman*.[1]

Late in 1887 the Yeats family went to live in London. Mr. Yeats was then twenty-one and had already written some of his most charming lyrics, though they were first published in book-form with *The Wanderings of Oisin*, in

[1] *Twenty-five Years*, pp. 190–2, 256–8.

1889. That volume has long been out of print, and many of the shorter poems it contained have been allowed to die with it, while some of the others have been so thoroughly revised that they are really new things. Among those that have never been reprinted is the exquisite sonnet, *She who dwelt among the Sycamores.*

A little boy outside the sycamore wood
Saw on the wood's edge gleam an ash-grey feather;
A kid, held by one soft white ear for tether,
Trotted beside him in a playful mood.
A little boy inside the sycamore wood
Followed a ringdove's ash-grey gleam of feather.
Noon wrapt the trees in veils of violet weather,
And on tip-toe the winds a-whispering stood.
Deep in the woodland paused they, the six feet
Lapped in the lemon daffodils; a bee
In the long grass—four eyes droop low—a seat
Of moss, a maiden weaving. Singeth she:
"I am lone Lady Quietness, my sweet,
And on this loom I weave thy destiny."

This poem, Mr. Yeats told me, he wrote in its first form when he was sixteen, and the reason why he has never reprinted it is that he came to consider later that he had spoiled it when he rewrote it as a sonnet. I do not know what the lost first version may have been, but as it stands it seems to me wholly delightful. There is a suggestion of the Pre-Raphaelite school in its minute detail, and it has an adorable freshness and *naïveté*, a kind of happy innocence,

a kind of delicate bloom upon it, that is characteristic of many of the early pieces. One of these, indeed, *The Stolen Child*, is to my mind as beautiful a lyric as he ever wrote, as beautiful as any to be found even in the golden age of English poetry.

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water rats;
There we've hid our faery vats
Full of berries,
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above Glen-Car,
In pools among the rushes
That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout,
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams;
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside;
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.
For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.[1]

In certain of these earliest poems the scene is laid in far-off lands, in Morocco, in Hungary, in India, in an Arcadia that is nowhere; and none of these, except *The Indian upon God*, is successful, though nearly all contain one or two beautiful lines. It is only in the Irish

[1] *Poems.*

poems—in such things as *King Goll, The Salley Gardens, To an Isle in the Water*—that Mr. Yeats really begins to find himself: and not even in all the Irish poems, for a few of these are quite uncharacteristic and commonplace both in style and subject. There is a fairy lyric actually written in the Dolores jingle, and in borrowing it Mr. Yeats has spoiled the tune, using an octosyllabic eighth line instead of Swinburne's shortened five-syllable line.

> Afar from our lawn and our levée,
> O sister of sorrowful gaze!
> Where the roses in scarlet are heavy
> And dream of the end of their days,
> You move in another dominion
> And hang o'er the historied stone:
> Unpruned is your beautiful pinion
> Who wander and whisper alone.[1]

Even in the more successful lyrics, though not in those I have mentioned, we find here and there, as is but to be expected, echoes from other poets. *The Ballad of Moll Magee* is written by an Irish Wordsworth. And sometimes we get lines like this—

> With a kiss and a tear on thy drooping brow,

which recalls Tom Moore: or this—

> Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan,

which might have come straight from Rossetti.

[1] *The Fairy Pedant.*

On the other hand, there runs through a large portion of the book a kind of natural charm and simplicity; an essentially youthful quality, perhaps, but beautiful, delicate, and rare. I find this charm, I confess, in the unreprinted *Legend*, of which I give a couple of stanzas :—

The Maker of the stars and worlds
Sat underneath the market cross,
And the old men were walking, walking,
And little boys played pitch and toss.

. . . . . .

The place was empty now of people.
A cock came by upon his toes;
An old horse looked across a fence,
And rubbed along the rail his nose.

The unusual stressing of the third line of the first stanza here, the halt, as it were, that is brought into the tune, seems to me peculiarly characteristic, anticipating, though imperfectly, some of those wonderful, faltering rhythms, those strange pauses, which are to come later with a perfect mastery of technique.

Sometimes there is a quaint humour, as in the Monk's song in *Mosada* :—

I saw a stranger tap and wait
By the door of Peter's gate,
Then he shouted, "Open wide
Thy sacred door;" but Peter cried,
"No, thy home is deepest hell,
Deeper than the deepest well."

Then the stranger softly crew—
" Cock-a-doodle-doodle-do ! "
Answered Peter : " Enter in,
Friend ; but 'twere a deadly sin
Ever more to speak a word
Of any unblessed earthly bird."

And on nearly every page we meet with the wild, delightful creatures Mr. Yeats himself met with in the rambles of his boyhood : weasels and herons, the " mice in the barley sheaves," " drowsy water-rats " and " slumbering trout," " wise owls in their downy caps," " swallows flashing their white breasts," " dreaming water-fowls," spiders and squirrels, rabbits and hares and frogs. The rose has not yet overshadowed all other flowers, drawing up their frailer life into her heavy perfume. There are marigolds and foxgloves and gillyflowers, " lemon daffodils," " wet wild strawberry leaves," hawthorn, sorrel, and even puffballs. Like his own fairies he hears " the breathing of the smallest bird," " the beating of the lev'ret's heart." The " winds are weak as moths with broken wings," and " above the farm-house " " the little lake . . ."

rustles in the reeds with patient pushes,
Soft as the whispering of a long-lost footstep.

The technique of the verse is as yet uncertain, the form frequently conventional and

colourless; but the heavenly breath is there, the divine vision. Very few first books, for, if we except the brochure *Mosada*, it is his first book, can have been more full of promise, with here and there, and not infrequently, positive achievement. The bright light of an exquisite genius seems indeed to shine so clearly in several of these lyrics that to those who came across them when they were first written the future career of the young poet must have been a speculation of extraordinary interest. For there is nothing to tell positively in what direction he is going to develop. Looking backward, we may see that indication now in the third book of *The Wanderings of Oisin*; but in the lyrics he seems at times close enough to a simple natural world to suggest a kinship with Wordsworth. A Wordsworth who should be a supreme artist, and with that matchless gift for the creation of music which is Mr. Yeats's greatest gift—what poems might he not have written? There is a sort of wonder in the finest of these lyrics, as of a spirit worshipping before the fresh, dew-drenched beauty of a world in some radiant dawn of time.

In the charming little introduction to *John Sherman*, written a year or two later, we get a sort of confession of his point of view, an apology, as he calls it, for his stories, that

might serve equally well for the poems, if, indeed, either poems or stories needed any apology. The fact that Mr. Yeats has not reprinted it I seize upon as an excuse for reproducing it here.

The maker of these stories has been told that he must not bring them to you himself. He has asked me to pretend that I am the author. I am an old little Irish spirit, and I sit in the hedges and watch the world go by. I see the boys going to market driving donkeys with creels of turf, and the girls carrying baskets of apples. Sometimes I call to some pretty face, and we chat a little in the shadow, the apple basket before us, for . . . I care for nothing in the world but love and idleness. Will not you, too, sit down under the shade of the bushes while I read you the stories? The first I do not care for because it deals with dull persons and the world's affairs, but the second has to do with my own people. If my voice at whiles grows distant and dreamy when I talk of the world's affairs, remember that I have seen all from my hole in the hedge. I hear continually the songs of my own people who dance upon the hillside, and am content. I have never carried apples or driven turf myself, or if I did it was only in a dream. Nor do my kind use any of man's belongings except the little black pipes which the farmers find now and then when they are turning the sods over with a plough.[1]

[1] *John Sherman*, pp. 1–2.

The principal poem, of course, in *The Wanderings of Oisin* (or *Usheen*, as it is now printed), is the long narrative poem which gives the book its title, a kind of Odyssey, which William Morris, of whom Mr. Yeats at this time saw a good deal, praised as "his kind of poetry." He would have said more, Mr. Yeats tells us, if his attention had not been diverted by the sight of a decorative lamp-post (the kind of thing which evidently had power to move him in much the same way as Miss Betsey Trotwood was moved by the sudden apparition of a donkey in her garden), "and waving his umbrella at the post, he raged at the Corporation."[1]

The framework of *The Wanderings of Usheen* is much the same as that adopted by Coleridge for his Rime of the Ancient Mariner, though the resemblance between the poems begins and ends there. It is a long monologue, broken here and there by dialogue. Usheen takes the part of the Ancient Mariner, Saint Patrick that of the Wedding-Guest. Usheen tells the Saint of his three hundred years of wandering in "faery lands forlorn," where he has been the lover of Niam :—"three centuries"

Of dalliance with a demon thing.

But though broken now in body by the burden

[1] *Samhain*, November, 1908.

of old age that has suddenly fallen upon him, in spirit he is still a wild old pagan, "wrecked among heathen dreams"; and in this contrast between pagan and Christian Ireland lies a certain dramatic element that heightens the interest of the tale.

One day, in his youth, he and his companions, while hunting a deer, had come to "the dove-grey edge of the sea," and there found "a pearl-pale, high-born lady," riding on horseback.

> And like a sunset were her lips,
> A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
> A citron colour gloomed in her hair. . . .

She tells them she is Niam, daughter of Aengus, her country lying far "beyond the tumbling of this tide."

> O Usheen mount by me and ride
> To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide,
> Where men have heaped no burial mounds,
> And the days pass by like a wayward tune,
> Where broken faith has never been known,
> And the blushes of first love never have flown. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Music and love and sleep await,
> Where I would be when the white moon climbs,
> The red sun falls, and the world grows dim.

And Usheen, heedless of the prayers of his companions, goes with her, and they ride forth over "the glossy sea," and, like the

knight in the toils of La Belle Dame sans Merci, he is unconscious of the passing of days or of hours, feeling only that her arms are about him, hearing only the sound of her voice as she sings to him fairy songs. They come to the Island of Dancing,

> And where the wood and waters meet
> We tied the horse in a leafy clump.
> . . . . . .
> And from the woods rushed out a band
> Of men and maidens, hand in hand.

Here for a hundred years, in hunting and fishing, in dance and song and love, Usheen lingers, till one day, standing by the sea, he finds in the foam the shaft of a broken lance, and begins to remember. And as he remembers a subtle change comes over everything, and he hears a faint song that brings back with it all the sorrow of human things :

> An old man stirs the fire to a blaze,
> In the house of a child, of a friend, of a brother ;
> He has over-lingered his welcome ; the days,
> Grown desolate, whisper and sigh to each other ;
> He hears the storm in the chimney above,
> And bends to the fire and shakes with the cold,
> While his heart still dreams of battle and love,
> And the cry of the hounds on the hills of old.
>
> But we are apart in the grassy places,
> Where care cannot trouble the least of our days,
> Or the softness of youth be gone from our faces,
> Or love's first tenderness die in our gaze.
> . . . . . .

But the love-dew dims our eyes till the day
When God shall come from the sea with a sigh
And bid the stars drop down from the sky,
And the moon like a pale rose wither away.

With this singing in his ears the enchantment breaks, and Usheen and Niam mount once more upon horseback, and ride on to the Island of Victories.

Here Usheen sets free the maiden who is chained

To two old eagles, full of ancient pride;

and fights and slays the demon who holds her captive. Every fourth day the demon comes to life again, and in this fashion for a hundred years the battle is prolonged.

The hundred years had ceased;
I stood upon the stair: the surges bore
A beech bough to me, and my heart grew sore,
Remembering how I had stood by white-haired Finn
Under a beech at Emen and heard the thin
Outcry of bats.

In the third book they come to the Island of Forgetfulness. There, in a valley, they see

Under the starlight and shadow, a monstrous slumbering folk,
Their naked and gleaming bodies poured out and heaped in the way.
. . . . . .
So long were they sleeping, the owls had builded their nests in their locks,
Filling the fibrous dimness with long generations of eyes.

Usheen blows a note on the horn and one of the sleepers half opens his eyes, and sways the bell-branch that has brought down upon them this magical sleep.

Half open his eyes were, and held me, dull with the smoke of their dreams ;
His lips moved slowly in answer, no answer out of them came ;
Then he swayed in his fingers the bell-branch, slow dropping a sound in faint streams
Softer than snow-flakes in April and piercing the marrow like flame.

Wrapt in the wave of that music, with weariness more than of earth,
The moil of my centuries filled me ; and gone like a sea-covered stone
Were the memories of the whole of my sorrow and the memories of the whole of my mirth,
And a softness came from the starlight and filled me full to the bone.

For a hundred years Usheen and Niam sleep side by side in the long grass and sorrel, and when Usheen awakens he is filled with a longing to return to his own world once more, if only for a day. Niam allows him to go, but is filled with foreboding of evil, for if he touches the earth, even so much as a grain of its sand, he will never be able to come back to her.

Usheen returns to Ireland, which he had left in its heroic pagan days, to find his companions dead and the country mournful with

the prayer and penance of the new religion. Sick at heart, lonely and sad, like Tannhäuser he seeks to come back to his immortal love. But in a moment of forgetfulness, of contempt and anger aroused by the sight of two men of this degenerate, priest-scared age, who stagger under the weight of a sack of sand, he leans from his saddle and seizing the sack flings it five yards. Thus what Niam dreaded comes to pass, the spell is broken, and Usheen drops from his horse, and when he rises to his feet again he is

> A creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry.

He is brought to Saint Patrick, but, instead of repenting and seeking forgiveness, he rejects the hope of salvation offered to him, and, praising his companions, cries aloud that he will join them there where they are tossed "on the flaming stones" of hell.

I should say here that in making this analysis I have had before me, and quoted from, the final version of the poem, which received its finishing touches only in 1912. In it the first two books have been entirely rewritten, only a few lines here and there of the original poem remaining. On the other hand, the third book has hardly been altered at all. To return now to that original version. *The Wanderings of*

Usheen is an Odyssey conceived by a poet who will one day write *The Shadowy Waters;* though in saying this I am thinking much more of the third part of it than of the other two infinitely less characteristic parts. It is dominated by a dream-laden mood. The only battle is a battle with a demon "dry as a withered sedge." Reading the third part of *Usheen,* and reading *The Shadowy Waters,* one can hardly fail to be struck by how much they have in common. The poet has developed, has changed; but the change lies almost wholly in an increased mastery of his art, the point of view is unaltered. And the irresistible conviction is forced upon us that this point of view, arrived at twenty-seven years ago, *is* Mr. Yeats's, and so intimately, so exclusively his, that he can only depart from it, once he has reached it, under the deliberate whipping of his will. The poem is extraordinary as the work of so young a man. Its romantic charm is at once delicate and full of colour. If it reveals nothing else, it reveals a temperament that, whatever its limitations, is poetic through and through. The workmanship, particularly in the first two parts, is uneven, but the verse is always remarkable for its melodiousness. In the first two parts Mr. Yeats has not yet shaken off external influences. These parts recall in

places both Keats and Shelley. But in the third part he is himself. The trees "dropping old silence," the trees "like an army of old men longing for rest," "the sea's edge barren and grey," the "dews dropping sleep," "the fluttering sadness of earth," the eyes of the mighty sleeper "dull with the smoke of their dreams": in these we have the characteristic Yeats imagery, an imagery that was then quite new in English literature. The poem is richer in romantic, sensuous beauty than Endymion—with which it is not unnatural to compare it—and the art that has gone to its making is far beyond that of the youthful Keats. In Endymion everything is sacrificed to detail; the design—if it can be said to have a design—is lost in a maze of allusions, of side-issues, in a beautiful cloud of colour, bewildering and baffling: everywhere is the exuberance, the "gush" of immaturity. But Mr. Yeats had set out to tell a story, and the story is never for a moment lost sight of. It is unfolded with the utmost lucidity, and with a fastidious avoidance of surplusage. A different form of verse is employed in each of the three books, and one reads the whole without any of that sense of monotony which usually overtakes one when reading a poem of this length.

In its final form it is quite perfect. The first two parts, as I have said, have been completely rewritten, and the entire thing now has that unity of effect which is worth a thousand wandering, unrelated beauties. It is as if it had sprung straight and whole from the brain that conceived it, without any of the toil of writing, the flagging moments, the taking up and breaking of a thread. A wealth of lyrical beauty has been showered upon it with the utmost prodigality. This beauty is sustained as it has rarely been sustained in so long a poem. Hardly for a moment does it drop below its own highest level, which is very high indeed; and the rich, at times almost sluggish, melody of the verse gives it an atmosphere as dreamy and strange as that of Tennyson's Lotos-Eaters. Can we say that it is a great poem? I think so. It quite frankly has nothing to give but its beauty, and that beauty is a pagan and sensuous beauty: its ethical, its moral significance is absolutely nil. It will seem great to us, therefore, in proportion as we care for art for its own sake—that is, for the sake of beauty—as the painter, the musician—Whistler, Mozart—care for it. Certainly *Usheen* was infinitely the greatest poem Ireland had produced up to the year 1889, and would have been the greatest

poem now had not Mr. Yeats himself surpassed it.

It might be interesting to give here examples of the first and last texts of *Usheen*. I take for the purpose a song from the second book. The original version runs thus :—

My brothers and my sisters live and thrive,
And chase the wild bee homeward to his hive
  Afar in ancient Eri,
By lakes and meadow lands and lawns afar,
Where goes to gaze the restless-footed star
  Of twilight when he's weary.

They murmur like young partridge in the morn,
When they awake upspringing ; with loud horn
  They chase at noon the deer.
When the earliest dew-washed star from eve hath leant,
Then muse they on the household wool intent,
  Or carve a dreadful spear.

Oh, sigh, awake and go you forth for me ;
Flutter along the froth-lips of the sea,
  And go you close to them.
From sleeper unto sleeper murmur you.
If they still slumber, touch their eyelids blue,
  And shake their coverlet's hem,

And tell them how I weep, until they weep ;
Then, mounted on a heron, o'er the deep
  Return when you are weary,
And tell me how my kindred's tears are welling,
And one whom you will go to without telling,
  Say how he weeps in Eri.

This is the revised text :—

My brothers spring out of their beds at morn,
A-murmur like young partridge : with loud horn
They chase the noontide deer ;
And when the dew-drowned stars hang in the air
Look to long fishing-lines, or point and pare
An ash-wood hunting spear.

O sigh, O fluttering sigh, be kind to me ;
Flutter along the froth lips of the sea,
And shores, the froth lips wet :
And stay a little while, and bid them weep :
Ah, touch their blue-veined eyelids if they sleep,
And shake their coverlet.

When you have told how I weep endlessly,
Flutter along the froth lips of the sea
And home to me again,
And in the shadow of my hair lie hid,
And tell me how you came to one unbid,
The saddest of all men.

This is an excellent example of what Mr. Yeats has done in the way of revision. The original version undoubtedly has charm, but it has nothing like the finished beauty of the later version. It is struggling towards freedom, but has not yet found it. The individuality of the poet is only intermittently present. There are lines that are quite frankly bad lines : " From sleeper unto sleeper murmur you," could hardly be worse. In the later version all that was good in the early

version has been kept, and made better; all that was indifferent has been removed; and the twenty-four lines are reduced to eighteen. The colour, meanwhile, has completely altered. The form has been perfected, and that hint of prettiness—it was here but a hint—which characterizes so much Anglo-Irish verse, has disappeared. Compare

When the earliest dew-washed star from eve hath leant,

with

And when the dew-drowned stars hang in the air;

compare

And tell me how my kindred's tears are welling,
And one whom you will go to without telling,
Say how he weeps in Eri,

with

And in the shadow of my hair lie hid,
And tell me how you came to one unbid,
The saddest of all men.

The difference is, I think, just the difference between pleasant verse and poetry.

II

POEMS 1890–1899

I

At first Mr. Yeats seems to have disliked London. Later it was to become tolerable to him, but principally, one imagines, for the sake of friends who lived there, the "companions of the Cheshire Cheese," among whom were Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and in particular Mr. Arthur Symons, the comrade of many years. In the beginning there are no friends, and all through the letters written to Katharine Tynan there runs a curiously poignant feeling of home-sickness, an emotion that was to give him a subject for his first and only novel, *John Sherman*. For that quaint little tale is really the story of Sherman's love for Sligo much more than of his love for Mary Carton. Mary Carton is little else than the embodied spirit of the town, and that she is there at all seems somehow a concession to the novel convention, which imposes a more or less definitely erotic interest. And we find him writing to Katharine Tynan,

Any breath of Ireland in this hateful London, where you cannot go five paces without seeing some wretched object broken either by wealth or poverty, is good. . . . Henley has recommended me to *Chambers's Encyclopædia* for Irish subjects. I should rather like such work for the present, my great wish being to do no work in which I should have to make a compromise with my artistic conscience. When I cannot write my own thoughts—wishing never to write other people's for money—I want to get mechanical work to do. Otherwise one goes down into the whirlpool of insincerity from which no man returns. . . .

Here are two verses I made the other day . . .

I will arise and go now and go to the island of Innisfree,
And live in a dwelling of wattles, of woven wattles and wood-work made.
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a yellow hive for the honey-bee,
And this old care shall fade.

There from the dawn above me peace will come down, dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the household cricket sings.
And noontide there be all a glimmer, and midnight be a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

And again :—

Here is a little song written lately, one thing written this long while beside bare prose.

The angels are sending
  A smile to your bed.
They weary of tending
  The souls of the dead.

Of tending the Seven—
  The planets' old brood:
And God smiles in heaven
  To see you so good.

My darling, I kiss you,
  With arms round my own.
Ah, how shall I miss you
  When heavy and grown.

It is pleasant to think that this letter will go away out of this horrid London, and get to the fields, and rattle along in the basket from Clondalkin to Whitehall. I wish I could fold myself up and go in it. A ghost, you know, can hide in a diamond or any such thing. I suppose the buds are all coming out with you. Here there is snow on the ground.

My life is altogether ink and paper. But it is hard to go on working industriously for the MSS. boxes. It tends to bring about a state of things when one is too industrious to be idle, and too idle to be industrious. However, I am exemplary at present. . . . I have written lately everything with a practical intention, nothing for the mere pleasure of writing, not a single scrap of a poem all these months. . . .

Have you read the *Fairy Tales* ýet? There are some that would do for ballads, I think. I shall some day try my hand at Countess Kathleen O'Shea. . . .

I am anxious to look about me and become passive for a while. I have woven about me a web of thoughts. I wish to break through it and see the world again. The incident about —— pained me at the time, but now that he is out of my sight, if I heard he was dead I should not think twice about it; so thick has the web got. An accident to one of my MSS. or a poem turning out badly would seem of more importance. . . . It is all the web.

And from Rosses Point in Sligo :—

It is a wonderfully beautiful day. The air is full of trembling light. The very feel of the familiar Sligo earth puts me in good spirits. I should like to live here always, not so much out of liking for the people as for the earth and sky, though I like the people too. . . .[1]

That last sentence is significant, for it is the earth and the sky that live in his poetry, not the people. There is in all these letters, which I should have liked to quote in full, so interesting and illuminating are they, a very simple, winning and delicate beauty. They reveal in every line the vision and touch of a poet, expressing in the rapid words of the moment very much what is expressed more carefully in the early lyrics. This consistency of genius is one of Mr. Yeats's most remarkable characteristics. Everything he writes, whether it be

[1] *Twenty-five Years*, p. 259 *sqq.*

only the prospectus for a new theatre, or a contribution to some newspaper controversy, or a speech to be delivered at a political meeting, bears the unmistakable stamp of his temperament as clearly as his most elaborate work. Already, we find, he is dabbling in spiritualism, to the uneasiness of some of his friends, and is deeply interested in psychical research. In one of the letters written about this time he refers to a haunted house in which he has been staying and where he heard all day "strange knockings on the walls and on the glass of an old mirror." In yet another letter he mentions having called on Madame Blavatsky, who, however, was not at home, though he meets at her house a Countess W—— and is told by her "of horrible things she has seen, or believes she has seen, the medium thrown down by a spirit and half-stifled, the marks of fingers coming on his throat, and his clothes being set on fire." He had, indeed, been interested in spiritualism before he left Dublin, and Mrs. Hinkson gives a remarkable description of a séance she attended in that city, in the year 1887.

We sat round a table in the darkness touching each other's hands. I was quite determined to be in opposition to the whole thing, to disbelieve in it, and disapprove of it as a playing with things of life

and death. Presently the table stood up slowly: the host was psychic. There were presences. The presences had communications to make and struggled to make them. Willie Yeats was banging his head on the table as though he had a fit, muttering to himself. I had a cold repulsion to the whole business. I took my hands from the table. Presently the spirits were able to speak. There was someone in the room who was hindering them. By this time I had got in a few invocations of my own. There was a tremendous deal of rapping going on. The spirits were obviously annoyed. They were asked for an indication as to who it was that was holding them back. They indicated me, and I was asked to withdraw, which I did cheerfully. The last thing I saw as the door opened to let me pass through was Willie Yeats banging his head on the table.[1]

All this is but an indication of that intense intellectual and spiritual curiosity which from the beginning had ruled Mr. Yeats's life. Philosophy, metaphysics, theory, have always had an irresistible attraction for him, and might indeed, had his genius been a slighter thing and his circumstances different, quite conceivably have drawn him from his poetic work and left the world so much the poorer. "A. E." told me how when they were living together Yeats would come home after a long evening of discussion burning to continue it

[1] *Twenty-five Years*, pp. 208–9.

on through the small hours, for it was at night that his mind ever seemed to be most wakeful. "A. E.," having to get up early in the morning to go to his work, would be only anxious to get to bed and to sleep, but that did not matter. On one occasion, about two a.m., as he lay in bed he saw Yeats come into their room, and, scenting the Socratic passion for dispute, pretended to be asleep. He watched the poet gaze down suspiciously at him for a minute or two, and then, slowly and very reluctantly, begin to undress. But when he had taken off his coat, he came to a pause and began to stalk up and down the floor. Presently, bringing over a candle, he made an even more prolonged and searching examination of his friend, who lay very still, with eyes shut. Yeats hesitated, resumed his pacing of the room, but at last could resist temptation no longer. Catching "A. E." by the shoulder he gave him a vigorous shake. "Wake up, Russell! I have found a new classification of principles."

And side by side with the study of spiritualism, magic, esoteric philosophy, creative work was being carried on, inevitably, as he plunged deeper into these things, becoming more and more tinged by them. Their influence is apparent enough in a number of the lyrics in *The Countess Kathleen* volume, which

appeared in 1892, three years after *The Wanderings of Oisin*. It is still more visible in *The Secret Rose* of 1897, and *The Wind Among the Reeds* of 1899. Certain of the stories especially, things like *Rosa Alchemica*, and *The Adoration of the Magi*, are really elaborate studies in occultism, not written by one who merely wishes to gain an effect of strangeness from the strangeness of his material, but by one who is himself seeking to come by such paths to truth.

In *The Countess Kathleen* volume—I am writing here of the lyrics that accompanied the play, not of the play itself, which must be reserved for another chapter—Mr. Yeats is already a great poet. It contains the best known of all his poems, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, as well as the first examples of those brief, ecstatic lyrics which he is later, in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, to make so distinctively his own—things from which everything that is not absolutely essential has been removed, so that what is left is the very soul, the very essence of poetry, burning with a bright clear flame of spiritual rapture. There are two or three further ballads, two or three short heroic poems in which some old tale of fighting and death is lifted to the level of impassioned poetry by a personal note that strikes through it, trans-

forming it, flooding it with the light of individual vision. But it is in the love poems that the greatest advance has been made. The earlier volume had nothing to offer comparable with this :

When you are old and gray and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep ;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true ;
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.

And bending down beside the glowing bars
Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Probably the reader will be reminded of the most perfect of Ronsard's sonnets to Hélène de Surgères—

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,
Assise auprès du feu, devidant et filant,
Direz, chantant mes vers, et vous esmerveillant :
Ronsard me celebroit du temps que j'estois belle :

but there is nothing in Ronsard's lines to equal the depth and gravity of the later poem. Here we have great art, not only good art but great art, with the nobility and dignity and tenderness that are its attributes.

Let me take another poem, which shows a still further advance in technique :—

A pity beyond all telling
Is hid in the heart of love :
The folk who are buying and selling ;
The clouds on their journey above ;
The cold wet winds ever blowing ;
And the shadowy hazel grove
Where mouse-gray waters are flowing
Threaten the head that I love.

Already, you see, he has got rid of all rhetorical ornament, of all that artificiality which comes in with what is called poetic diction, with those redundancies for the sake of metre or rhyme which a poet like Swinburne habitually uses, those inversions which even an artist so scrupulous as Mr. Bridges tolerates. The language in this poem has that nakedness so dear to Wordsworth, though he did not always quite attain to it himself. It is, as that marvellous old man claimed that the language of poetry must be, "the language really used by men . . . who feel vividly and see clearly,"[1] and hence can "in no respect differ from that of good prose." Each word is directly expressive. That is to say, it is not there for its own sake, for any merely ornamental quality it may possess, but is there to help the sense, and the whole thing, while re-

[1] *Poetical Works* (Oxford ed.), p. 939.

maining as simple and direct as "good prose," has at the same time a wonderful emotional force and poetic beauty. I have already quoted the first version of the *Cradle Song*:[1] I now give a later version in the hope that it may help to illustrate what I mean:—

The angels are bending
Above your white bed;
They weary of tending
The souls of the dead.

God smiles in high heaven
To see you so good;
The old planets seven
Grow gay with his mood.

I kiss you and kiss you,
With arms round my own;
Ah, how shall I miss you,
When, dear, you have grown.

Here each alteration tends to bring the whole thing closer to natural speech. Note how in the first two lines what was impersonal in them, because touched by the faintest hint of conventionality, becomes personal; how they gain, too, with their increased homeliness, a quality of tenderness, of *affection*, and so become more dramatically truthful in their expression of the love of the mother crooning such words over the cradle of her sleeping child. This quality is really the result of a

[1] See p. 42.

deeper imaginative vision. The whole thing is more definite, more concrete, more realized, and the mention of the "white bed" gives it its scenery, its intimate setting that is at once a matter of atmosphere and of picture. And again, in the second stanza, the mood of a half-playful tenderness is made more real by a closer approach to the words of ordinary life, while the poetry in them, nevertheless, is touched by a kind of reflected light of immortal things, a hint of the soul's mysterious and splendid destiny, of a divine care ever heedful of human creatures. In the last stanza the sudden yearning of love becomes by the simple repetition of a phrase more passionate, with a sweet protective happy passion that is all gentleness even in its jealousy of the future.

And now for the final version :—

The angels are stooping
Above your bed;
They weary of trooping
With the whimpering dead.

God's laughing in heaven
To see you so good;
The Shining Seven
Are gay with his mood.

I kiss you and kiss you,
My pigeon, my own;
Ah, how I shall miss you
When you have grown.

The changes in the first stanza are more external than the changes we have before noted. Internally, spiritually, there is no improvement: the lines are more striking simply because the imagery is more unusual. And this very unusualness distinctly weakens their dramatic fitness. What we have lost is a certain intimacy; what we get instead is something a little mannered and over-deliberate, which tends to dissipate the atmosphere and blur the picture. In the second stanza the alteration in the first line is all in the manner of the earlier alterations. The line is now quite perfect, might indeed almost have been overheard and reproduced without change, so exquisitely natural is it. The alteration in the third line is purely technical, and in getting rid of an inversion becomes less definite; possibly, to those who do not know the earlier form, becomes even obscure. We accept the "old planets seven" instinctively, but somehow "the Shining Seven" is quite another matter. The fact is, that in both these stanzas we have moved towards another convention, which is Mr. Yeats's own peculiar convention. The style has cooled and hardened, has become too obtrusive. Dramatic truth has been sacrificed, because we are now much more con-

scious of the voice of Mr. Yeats than of the voice of the mother who is singing the song; that is to say, he has, in a sense, lost sight of his subject in a preoccupation with other things. In the third stanza there is a very real improvement, which comes partly from the much better second line, partly from the disappearance of the awkward and entirely unnecessary inversion in the third, and partly from the disappearance of the word "dear" from the fourth, where it spoiled the tune and was, moreover, coming after the adverb, unnaturally placed.

All this may appear somewhat finicking and I hasten to assure the reader that I shall not have space, even if I had the will, to follow so minutely as this the metamorphoses through which many of the other poems have passed. I have chosen *The Cradle Song* simply because I had already quoted it in one of Mr. Yeats's letters, and it will have served its purpose if it has shown how fundamental, how far from whimsical, is the process of revision to which he submits his work. It may show, to put it differently, his remarkable definiteness of aim. He always knows what he wants to do. His poetry, though it is eminently inspired, is, for all that, an essentially learned poetry, and becomes more and more so with each succes-

sive volume. He may at times, particularly in a few of the later poems, be obscure, but he is never uncertain as to his own meaning. His obscurity never springs from anything else than a too flattering faith in his reader's erudition; that is to say, he occasionally expects him to understand allusions which he may very easily not understand. His poetry is never obscure in the way Swinburne's Song of Italy is obscure, with an emptiness and excess of sound, a strange fire that produces neither heat nor light, but only the roaring of a flame and the dust of ashes. Even the more mystical poems are kept concrete by the vividness of their imagery, and stamp a definite picture on the mind. The most abstract among them are never addressed solely to the intellect, though in the simplest the intellect is never forgotten. Behind each one of them there is brain-work, but they are also, in Milton's words, "simple, sensuous, impassioned."[1] What strikes us, indeed, throughout his work, even in a lyric of eight lines, is an absence of "slightness." He is always satisfying; his brevity is a result of a mastery of style and technique; each line is filled with matter.

What he gains from this is an unusual richness not only of surface but of substance. No

[1] *Tract on Education.*

poetry improves more on a closer acquaintance, will bear a more constant re-reading, is more generously responsive to the time and study we bring to it. It has in it that life-giving quality, most rare and precious, of supplying foodstuff for the soul: a quality without which literature, even when a talent like Maupassant's has shaped it, stales as quickly as we get to know it. The story which is a mere story, no matter whether it be told in prose or verse, no matter what skill be brought to the telling of it, can never be anything but an inferior form of art, appealing to curiosity, a desire to know what is going to happen, and gaining a reward in its immediate popularity. But poetry is never popular. A given poem may be popular, as Wordsworth's Lucy Gray is comparatively popular; or, in a more positive degree, as Fitzgerald's Omar, and Poe's Raven are popular; but it will always be for some other quality than its strictly poetic quality. Most people who care for these things, care for them because of their sentiment or their teaching or the story they tell, but not really for their poetry, for the "solitary song that whistles in the wind." Yet it is exactly upon the presence in it of what is essentially poetic that the value of not only verse but of every form of imaginative literature

depends. It might be claimed for Thackeray that he had a more finished style than Emily Brontë had, but few, I think, to whom literature as an art really means anything, will claim for Vanity Fair that it stands on as high a level as Wuthering Heights. It may have a high place in its own class, but it belongs to an essentially *lower* class. One might go further, indeed, and say that it is just because of its continuously poetic substance that Wuthering Heights, which bears everywhere upon it the marks of an imperfect technique, is nevertheless one of the greatest novels ever written.

Now in Mr. Yeats's work what we get is poetry, and almost nothing but poetry. From beginning to end there is not even a momentary concession to those who demand anything else. Nor does he express in his poetry the thoughts and tendencies of his age, as Matthew Arnold and Tennyson expressed at least the religious thought of their time. Probably no poet has ever got into his work a more personal atmosphere. He seems not so much to look at the world as to brood over the images that are thrown from the world upon the mirror of his own soul. Nothing appears in his work that has not passed through and been transformed by his imagination. What we mean by style is, I suppose, only the more or less perfect

expression of a writer's individuality, and the wonderful uniformity of spirit which reaches from book to book, and draws together all Mr. Yeats's writings, making of them a kind of complete and rounded whole, is in great part the result of the undividedness of his personality, of a temperament that is amazingly self-centred. He is always himself. No one has ever worked with a more jealous care for his art, and each rewriting of a poem has, at this time, almost invariably the effect of bringing it nearer to his own innermost vision. Hence it is that his work, as a rule, either strongly attracts or equally strongly repels. One may like it or one may not like it, but it would be difficult to remain untouched by it. Where it is accepted it becomes a part of life. It gives something that nothing else has ever given or can give. It blossoms and bears fruit: it has the profound influence of a deep spiritual experience.

And yet it stands, as I have said, extraordinarily outside the tendencies of an age whose art, too rarely touched by any desire for beauty, is becoming more and more controversial, more and more, in literature at least, the unwilling and ungrateful bondservant of movements social or economical, so that one chooses one's poet or one's novelist or one's

dramatist as one chooses one's newspaper, for his opinions on politics, the relations of the sexes, socialism, the emancipation of women.

In 1898 the new movement was only beginning, though Grant Allen had published several "Hilltop" novels, and Mr. Bernard Shaw the first two volumes of his plays. From a newspaper controversy[1] that took place towards the end of that year I glean the following remarks made by Mr. Yeats :—

I believe that the renewal of belief, which is the great movement of our time, will more and more liberate the arts from "their age" and from life, and leave them more and more free to lose themselves in beauty, and to busy themselves, like all the great poetry of the past and like religions of all times, with "old faiths, myths, dreams," the accumulated beauty of the age. I believe that all men will more and more reject the opinion that poetry is "a criticism of life," and be more and more convinced that it is a revelation of a hidden life. . . .

It may well be that men are only able to fashion into beautiful shapes the most delicate emotions of the soul, spending their days with a patience like the patience of the middle ages in the perfect rounding of a verse, or the perfect carving of a flower, when they are certain that the soul will not die with the

[1] In the columns of *The Daily Express*, Dublin, and reprinted as a pamphlet called *Literary Ideals in Ireland*.

body, and that the gates of peace are wide, and that the watchers are at their places upon the wall.[1]

He has been accused—it is a reproach to be found particularly often upon the lips of those who have neither the patience nor the will to understand him—of having all too successfully "liberated" his art from life; yet what he means is merely that he would liberate it from the bonds of an uninspired realism busied with interminable descriptions of external things. With an art that never gets beyond notebook and document, Mr. Yeats has, indeed, little sympathy. The artist must found his work on "what is permanent in the world," on what recurs through all the changing fashions of the ages, "as desire and hope, terror and weariness, spring and autumn recur."[2] There are painters who paint for posterity, making due allowance for the mellowing, softening touch of time, and Mr. Yeats has this in common with them, that his art is concerned only with a substance that that great collaborator cannot make stale. He writes of the deeper moments of life, of emotions that are eternal in human nature, of nature itself only as a transparent veil

[1] *Literary Ideals in Ireland*, p. 36.

[2] *Discoveries*, "The Two Kinds of Asceticism."

through which shine eternal spiritual powers. His philosophy has something in it of Platonism; his poetry is a setting free of the soul by means of mortal and changing things that it may gaze upon immortal and unchanging things. That is exactly what the Platonic Socrates sought to do by dialectic, and what he actually does do when poetry has not been overshadowed by dialectic. Both ancient philosopher and modern poet throw their net among the stars, and capture a strange and wandering loveliness that will always seem unearthly and illusive to those who, consciously or unconsciously, have accepted materialism, and to those upon whose souls the practical cares of life have closed down like a coffin-lid.

II

"I remember," Mr. Yeats says, "that when I first began to write I desired to describe outward things as vividly as possible, and took pleasure, in which there was, perhaps, a little discontent, in picturesque and declamatory books. And then quite suddenly I lost the desire of describing outward things, and found that I took little pleasure in a book unless it was spiritual and unemphatic. I did

not then understand that the change was from beyond my own mind, but I understand now that writers are struggling all over Europe . . . against that 'externality' which a time of scientific and political thought has brought into literature."[1]

The change he alludes to, and which he goes on to describe in detail, is what is known, and what Mr. Arthur Symons and other critics have written about, always a little narrowly and controversially, as the Symbolist Movement. It had found its inspiration in the one-sided, bizarre, and somewhat perverse genius of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, though poor Gérard de Nerval, whose talent had an almost Greek simplicity and purity, has been dragged in as a kind of precursor. It flourished for a few years, mainly in Paris, and is already half forgotten. For like most other movements it was but a wave that swept up out of obscurity a crowd of disciples who had little other artistic equipment than the ardour of their convictions. Intelligence is a rather rare quality among disciples, breadth of view a still rarer one, and the almost pitiful exiguity of that pale and bloodless world in which the Symbolists moved is revealed, far more cruelly than by any hostile critic, in the two volumes of Messrs.

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 296.

Van Bever and Léautaud's anthology, Poètes d'Aujourd'hui. In this we find what are presumably the masterpieces of forty-two poets, ranging alphabetically from M. Henri Barbusse to M. Francis Vielé-Griffin. The plan of the volumes gives M. Henri Barbusse a very unfair advantage, for when we have read his five pieces we have read the work of at least thirty-six out of our forty-two poets. They all seem to want to say the same thing, and to want to say it in very much the same way; and they all *do* say the same thing, with varying degrees of success. The one poet of the first rank who has been connected with the movement, if we exclude Mr. Yeats, is Verlaine, and Verlaine really is no more a Symbolist than Tennyson was. In spite of what has been claimed for him, and of what he has—probably at the suggestion of others—claimed for himself, I doubt if he had any very conscious theory of art at all. He was a Symbolist to oblige Mr. Arthur Symons and Stéphane Mallarmé and Remy de Gourmont, but he would have been any other "ist" they wanted with the same alacrity and good-nature. Certainly he had no such elaborate philosophy of life or of æsthetics as we find in the author of Axël, in Mallarmé, and in Mr. Yeats. He was a born poet and wrote very much as a bird sings.

He had a beautiful, a divine genius, but in his work there is not the slightest indication that he had ever *thought* on any subject whatever. Now one cannot be a Mallarmé or a Villiers or a Yeats without thought. In all of them the scientific, the intellectual element is perpetually awake and alert. They write with a theory as to how one ought to write constantly before them. In Mallarmé, who is the extremist, and the high-priest, of the movement, the act of composition becomes a sort of double process of invention and translation. He could write French of the most admirable lucidity and grace: his translations of Edgar Poe's poems are by far the subtlest achievements in that most difficult art I have ever seen. One would think that the man who could do them could, so far as mere technique might carry him, do very nearly anything he wanted. And no doubt this was the case. Unfortunately, what he wanted to do principally was to experiment with words, and while he translates Poe into French he translates his own verses into a language which is unintelligible even to the disciples. I think it would not be unfair to draw the conclusion that Mallarmé had not a great deal to say, and that he was far too sincere a lover of letters to desire to repeat himself. He had a

few poems to write, and he had a lifetime to write them in. Theory was his undoing. The whole attitude of mind that led to such tricks as the omission of punctuation, the photographing of the poems from the original manuscript, is inconceivable in a man with any great creative gift. Directly, or indirectly through the enthusiasm of his friend Arthur Symons, he had, and Villiers had, an influence, though only a temporary influence, upon Mr. Yeats.

Just when Mr. Yeats became a Symbolist I do not know, but it is not till *The Wind Among the Reeds* of 1899 that we find his use of symbols becoming deliberate and self-conscious, and from the moment it becomes so, from the moment it ceases to be instinctive, from the moment symbol ceases to be the metaphor that every poet from Homer to himself has employed, we see it beginning to hamper him, so that about half of that marvellous little book has to be devoted to explanatory notes. That the notes themselves are delightful, with a perhaps deliberately wandering and careless beauty, is no excuse for them. The only valid excuse one could imagine is certainly not one they can in most cases lay a claim to, namely, that they are unnecessary.

To return for a moment to M[illegible] statement of the case:—

"All art," he tells us, "th[illegible] story-telling, or mere portraitu[illegible] and has the purpose of those [illegible] mans which mediæval magici[illegible] complex colours and forms, [illegible] patients ponder over daily, [illegible] holy secrecy; for it entang[illegible] colours and forms, a part of [illegible] sence."[1]

As Mr. Arthur Symons re[illegible] more or less a re-statement [illegible] had said in Sartor Resartus. [illegible] proper, what we can call a [illegible] ever, more or less distinctly and [illegible] embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there."[2] As Mr. Yeats puts it, connecting it with the practices of "mediæval magicians," it is exactly the theory of Mallarmé. But there is a world of difference between the metaphor or unconscious symbolism of a Shelley or a Shakespeare and the definitely reasoned and arbitrary symbolism of Blake's prophetical

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 230.

[2] Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, p. 4.

some of Mr. Yeats's later poems. ple of legitimate symbolism— r poet's nomenclature—we may e has said about these two lines

moon is setting behind the white wave,
is setting with me, O!

s are perfectly symbolic. Take he whiteness of the moon and of whose relation to the setting of subtle for the intellect, and you em their beauty. But, when all moon and wave and whiteness Time and the last melancholy cry, n emotion which cannot be evoked her arrangement of colours and forms."[1]

t drawback to all this is that it really claims for the support of a theory effects that were not in the least arrived at by the conscious application of that theory. We might therefore expect to find these effects tremendously intensified in the poetry of the conscious artist who is working in the full light of his system, of his discovery. But *is* that what we find? Let us take a deliberately symbolic poem by Mr. Yeats:—

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 241.

I hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake,
Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white;
The North unfolds above them clinging, creeping night,
The East her hidden joy before the morning break,
The West weeps in pale dew and sighs passing away,
The South is pouring down roses of crimson fire:
O vanity of Sleep, Hope, Dream, endless Desire,
The Horses of Disaster plunge in the heavy clay. . . .[1]

There is an explanatory note to this poem which I shall leave to the reader to refer to if he needs it, though I may tell him that the last two lines I have quoted contain the key to the four preceding ones. But do we really find these lines suggestive as Burns's lines are suggestive, or as those lines by Nash, which Mr. Yeats is so fond of quoting, are suggestive?

Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.

Personally I do not think so. It is indeed only after I have referred to the note at the end of the book, which is over a page in length, that I can get much more from them than a mere lulling of the senses, a mere sensuous pleasure conveyed by the monotonous beating of the verse. As I understand art, above all the art of poetry, it should depend much more upon the natural, though of course

[1] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, p. 24.

cultivated, sensitiveness of the reader than upon his scientific knowledge. The scientific mind cares only for what is actually said, and poetry, which depends upon what never *can* quite be said, makes little or no appeal to it. But these lines of Mr. Yeats's depend, like the greater part of Blake's writings, altogether upon our proper understanding of what is said; are not, unless we hold the key to them, in the true sense of the word, suggestive at all. The faculties that we must bring to bear upon them are exactly the same faculties that we employ in scientific work. That is to say, until we have translated them and know that A=White, and B=Black, and C=Life, and D=Death, we know nothing.[1] This is mere Mallarméism in another form. Apart from the beauty of sound we get nothing till we have solved our puzzle, and while we are busy with the solution we lose even the beauty of sound. The first great truth that the artist must keep before him is that all unnecessary strain upon the reader's attention is so much to the bad, is sheer waste of a faculty that after all is limited and must relax in one direction when it is too arduously worked in another. If it is to be so worked the very purpose of rhythm is defeated. For rhythm is there to

[1] See p. 223.

induce in the reader a mood which is not in itself the subject of the poem, but the evocation of which is necessary before the poem can come to life in his imagination. To have to turn to a note, whether we turn to it before or after reading the poem, is fatal, keeps us firmly attached to a world of ink and paper. Our magician has failed, and we watch him coldly and sceptically, as Elijah watched the too sanguine priests of Baal.

In *The Wind Among the Reeds* symbolism is carried even beyond the actual content of the poems, for certain of the lyrics are put into the mouths of imaginary persons who are themselves symbols—Aedh, Hanrahan, Michael Robartes, the heroes of the stories of *The Secret Rose*, but here without their human attributes, being each identified with a particular mood of consciousness. As Mr. Yeats puts it in the notes, "Hanrahan is the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gath permanent possessions, or the adoration of t shepherds; and Michael Robartes is the p of the imagination brooding upon the grea of its possessions, or the adoration Magi; while Aedh is the myrrh and f cense that the imagination offers co before all that it loves."[1]

[1] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, pp. 7

I confess that I never found all this particularly convincing, and I find it still less so when, on turning to the *Collected Works*, I discover that the poems are no longer given to Aedh, Hanrahan, etc., but are there printed just as the other lyrics are printed. Yet if these personages meant anything in 1899 and in 1903, which are the dates of my two editions of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, it is hard to understand why they should mean nothing in 1908. And though now that they are gone we ought perhaps to treat them as if they had never existed, yet this swaying between opinions, this shifting of the point of view, somehow tends to invalidate similar theories when they are applied elsewhere, and to point to a suspicion of pedantry that is no less barren because it happens to be the pedantry of the artist.

Yet even as I make these remarks I find myself wondering if I have not laid too much ress upon obscurities that are after all not merous. Taking the work as a whole, it is inly as 'easy' as that of any other s poet I can call to mind, and easier than Moreover, one may get an intense from a poem like *The Happy Town*onging to a later volume[1] in which

[1] *Poems*, 1899–1905.

there are no notes—and not in the least be prepared to give an explanation of Gabriel and the "fish tail." So, too, the "little red fox," and the sun and the moon, may have an esoteric meaning: I take them simply as part of the most delightful poetic refrain imaginable.

III

Most of the lyrics in *The Wind Among the Reeds* are love poems, or philosophic poems, or a blend of the two; but there are three or four narrative poems, and one of these, *The Host of the Air*, cannot be passed over in silence, for it is the most perfect thing of its kind Mr. Yeats has written. Based upon a scrap of folk-lore in *The Celtic Twilight*,[1] and apparently among the simplest of his poems, nothing he has ever done shows a greater mastery of atmosphere, or a greater metrical mastery. His exquisite modifications and variations of a metre that might to some readers seem as artless as an old ballad metre are of a supreme beauty, yet so delicate, so unobtrusive, that the whole thing is like an improvisation, a thing dropped softly out of the air, like the passing murmur of wind.

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, "Kidnappers," p. 123.

O'Driscoll drove with a song
The wild duck and the drake,
From the tall and the tufted reeds
Of the drear Hart Lake.

And he saw how the reeds grew dark
At the coming of night tide,
And dreamed of the long dim hair
Of Bridget his bride.

He heard while he sang and dreamed
A piper piping away,
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay.

And he saw young men and young girls
Who danced on a level place
And Bridget his bride among them,
With a sad and a gay face.

The dancers crowded about him,
And many a sweet thing said,
And a young man brought him red wine
And a young girl white bread.

But Bridget drew him by the sleeve,
Away from the merry bands,
To old men playing at cards
With a twinkling of ancient hands.

The bread and the wine had a doom,
For these were the host of the air;
He sat and played in a dream
Of her long dim hair.

He played with the merry old men
And thought not of evil chance,
Until one bore Bridget his bride
Away from the merry dance.

He bore her away in his arms,
The handsomest young man there,
And his neck and his breast and his arms
Were drowned in her long dim hair.

O'Driscoll scattered the cards
And out of his dream awoke:
Old men and young men and young girls
Were gone like a drifting smoke;

But he heard high up in the air
A piper piping away,
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay.

I shall not write of the love poems in *The Wind* separately, for his treatment of love, here and elsewhere, brings out so clearly the peculiar beauty of his genius that it will be simpler and more profitable to group all the lyrics of this class together, taking the later with the earlier, and examine them more closely, with the imagery he makes use of in them.

They are certainly unlike any other erotic poetry that I know of. The passion in them seems somehow to be different in kind from the passion in, let us say, Rossetti's House of Life, where the erotic fever, as we are accustomed to conceive of it, finds perhaps its completest expression. It is not really different, of course, because it may be said to include the other; only it seems to be rooted in something

different. The passion has a spiritual intensity that it is difficult to find a parallel to in literature, unless we find it in Wuthering Heights. Some of these poems have a kind of white flame of rapture in which all that is of the earth is burned up. They express, as Emily Brontë's Heathcliff expresses, not the desire of the body, but the desire of the soul. Nevertheless, they are varied in their inspiration; and sometimes, as in *The Pity of Love*,[1] have a simple tenderness; sometimes, as in *A Memory of Youth*,[2] are saddened with a sense of love's brevity; while now and then they express an ecstatic longing that no mortal love can satisfy, and that is not really a love for any human being, but the cry of one who has his hands clutched upon the topmost rung of Diotima's ladder, and his eyes fixed upon "the divine beauty, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life." The words are Plato's[3] but they might have been the words of more than one of Mr. Yeats's lovers. It is in the pursuit of this ideal that the lover grows old and weary, is filled with an infinite restlessness and discontent. A "fire is in his head," a madness in his heart, that

[1] *Poems.* [2] *Responsibilities.*

[3] *Symposium* (trans. Jowett, vol. i, p. 582).

shut him out from all the rest of the world, and come between him and all that to other men makes life worth living.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.[1]

So, when Michael Robartes loves a mortal woman, it is really an eternal and imperishable beauty that he loves:

When my arms wrap you round I press
My heart upon the loveliness
That has long faded from the world. . . .[2]

And Aedh would rebuild the whole world, making of it a shrine for love; and that the beloved might be more tender and compas-

[1] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, "The Song of Wandering Aengus."

[2] *Ibid.*, "Michael Robartes Remembers Forgotten Beauty."

sionate, he would have her dead, "under the dock-leaves in the ground." Love is transformed by the imagination, bringing with it the sense of all eternity:

> And then you came with those red mournful lips,
> And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
> And all the trouble of her labouring ships,
> And all the trouble of her myriad years.[1]

The beauty of the beloved is the last perfected gift of Time; it has made the great dramas of the world's history, and the past lives in it as in a memory, and all the glory and nobility of the past:

> For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
> Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
> Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
> And Usna's children died.[2]

The beloved, like Helen, is desired of all men; "stars climbing the dew-dropping sky, live but to light her passing feet." Yet while the spirit is in the body, love is spoiled and wearied by time, threatened by all things. It is "less kind than the gray twilight,"

> Danger no refuge holds, and war no peace,
> For him who hears love sing. . . .[3]

"The hour of the waning of love" inevitably

[1] *Poems*, "The Sorrow of Love."
[2] *Ibid.*, "The Rose of the World."
[3] *Ibid.*, "The Rose of Battle."

draws near, bringing with it pensive autumnal thoughts, memories of a dead spring and summer. Then, for poor consolation, the lovers in their loneliness turn to each other by the sad lake's border.

> Ah, do not mourn . . .
> . . . for other loves await us;
> Before us lies eternity; our souls
> Are love, and a continual farewell.[1]

And yet again the hollowness of such consolation is proved by time, which is powerless to obliterate the beloved's image, as it is to cover away the memory of lost happiness:

> Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,
> I had a beautiful friend
> And dreamed that the old despair
> Would end in love in the end:
> She looked in my heart one day
> And saw your image was there;
> She has gone weeping away.[2]

No gifts are too precious to lay at the beloved's feet; yet in the end it is his dreams that the poet brings, the most precious gift of all. Dreams, however, turn to sadness, and hope withers away, and all that is certain is that time will bring change and separation, that death in life which is more cruel than

[1] *Poems*, "Ephemera."

[2] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, "Aedh laments the Loss of Love."

death itself, because of the countless dangers that accompany it. All that is left is a great longing in which the spirit seeks a reunion that is denied to the body.

All the words that I utter,
And all the words that I write,
Must spread out their wings untiring,
And never rest in their flight,
Till they come where your sad, sad heart is,
And sing to you in the night,
Beyond where the waters are moving,
Storm-darken'd or starry bright.[1]

Even in constancy there is danger. The poet fears to love too long lest he "grow out of fashion": yet love's tenderness and constancy are inexhaustible, and "time can but make" the beloved's "beauty over again"—

O she had not these ways
When all the wild summer was in her gaze:[2]

and in the last rapture he can cry aloud, "No one has ever loved but you and I!"

The imagery that clothes these superb poems is borrowed for the most part from dreaming Irish woods, from lonely lakes, from the sky and the sea. There is hardly an image, hardly an epithet, that does not strike us as much by its precision as by its novelty. The

[1] From *Irish Fairy Tales*, ed. by W. B. Yeats. Unwin, 1892.

[2] *Poems*, 1899–1905, "The Folly of Being Comforted."

words have a pictorial as well as a musical value. The images he uses are so interpenetrated by the idea that image and idea are as closely united as body and soul. We have but to turn his pages at random and begin to read anywhere to see this. There are few comparisons, but everywhere there is metaphor; and sometimes it is hard to tell even where the actual scene passes into a state of mind.

I wander by the edge
Of this desolate lake
Where wind cries in the sedge
Until the axle break
That keeps the stars in their round
And hands hurl in the deep
The banners of East and West
And the girdle of light is unbound,
Your breast will not lie by the breast
Of your beloved in sleep.[1]

In the very first words all that is given in the last words is given. The feeling of separation, of loneliness, of restless, hopeless sorrow seems to exist as much in the wind crying in the sedge, in the desolate lake, though these are suggested in three brief lines, as in the human cry of the man. The picture, the scene, is transfused by the idea, is indistinguishable from it.

[1] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, "Aedh hears the Cry of the Sedge."

Mr. Yeats's view of nature is in the highest degree mystical and subjective. The world, as we find it in his poetry, is a world that has passed through his imagination and is wrapped in the twilight which reigns there. The twilight hour is the hour he loves, "when white moths are on the wing, and moth-like stars are flickering out," "when owls begin to call," and the whole earth seems ready to dissolve into a dream. Thus wood and stream and mountain, the passing clouds, and the whiteness of water, appeal to him principally for their imaginative associations, and because they are presented everywhere as haunted by unseen presences, wrapped in mystery, brooded over by the atmosphere of the soul. The "sweet everlasting voices" "call in bird, in wind on the hill,"

In shaken boughs, in tide on the shore.

Nature is never evoked for her own sake as she is by Wordsworth. The cry of the curlew becomes the symbol of a lost love, of a love seeking love through the world and beyond the gates of death; and "the rushes and the fowl of the air cry of love with their pitiful cries." The "unquiet leaves" whisper uneasily with strange voices, or, when they are still, "drop old silence." And usually

the season is autumn—the season of melancholy and reverie, of a beauty subdued and fading.

> The woods of Arcady are dead,
> And over is their antique joy.

The paths along which lovers pace are strewn with fallen leaves; "the yellow leaves" turn and fall slowly about them, dropping down noiselessly "like faint meteors in the gloom." Even the rabbit that limps "down the path" is "old and lame": "autumn is over him," too, as it is over all things. "The hare grows old as she plays in the sun," and "the eagle cock . . . on Ballygawley Hill . . . is the oldest thing under the moon." Everywhere is "the fluttering sadness of earth;" in every sound we hear "earth's old and weary cry." Memories—memories and ghosts—and the restless longing of a mood that can only find rest in a life more perfect than this poor, broken, mortal life! "Desolate winds" cry "over the wandering sea," and "beat the doors of Heaven, and beat the doors of Hell." "Through the broken branches go the ravens of unresting thought," and "the boughs wither" when the poet tells "them his dreams."

Water is the symbol of the passing of mortal

beauty, and of the passing of time. To the old men by the thorn trees

> All that's beautiful drifts away
> Like the waters :

and Fergus sees his life " go dripping like a stream from change to change," while men's souls " waver " and drift on into the darkness, " like the pale waters in their wintry race."

The sky that is reflected in these waters is grey and wintry, or dark and stormy : they are never touched by the sun. It is on the border of " the drear Hart Lake " that O'Driscoll dreams " of the long dim hair of Bridget his bride " ; beside a " desolate lake " that Aedh hears the wind crying " in the sedge " of the hopelessness of love. The messages of wind and water, of the thin rushes and the swaying trees, are nearly always messages of sadness : and when they invite to joy, it is to an unearthly joy, an unholy joy, or to the joy of a life passed in lonely meditation. It is to " the woods and waters and pale lights " that the faery child lures Mary Bruin : and the murmur of the beech leaves draws King Goll out from his palace to dream away his life in lonely woods. These alluring, enchanted voices are never silent. Even in the heart of a distant city the poet hears them

with a passion of home-sickness, hears the call of far-off waters—"lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore."

The sea is a symbol of the "drifting indefinite bitterness of life." It is "the bitter tide," "the dim sea that cries her old cry still." The "dim tides are hurled upon the wharves of sorrow." The "old wandering moon" floats above them, glossing "the dim gray sands with light." By "the dove-gray edge of the sea" Usheen meets Niam, who leads him to perdition and the joys of the Venusberg. The stars are "white stars," "foam of the sky"; and the sky is the "dew-dropping sky," and night "the dew-dropping night"—"old Night" who tells "her mystery" "to the sad, the lonely, the insatiable."

The moon is a symbol of weariness. She is "worn"; a "shell washed by time's waters."

> I had a thought for no one's but your ears;
> That you were beautiful, and that I strove
> To love you in the old high way of love;
> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary hearted as that hollow moon.[1]

In contrast with all this earth-weariness and sorrow is the passionate, glowing life of immortal beings, "the embattled flaming multitude who rise wing above wing, flame above

[1] *Poems*, 1899–1905, "Adam's Curse."

flame," amid the " rapturous music " of " the clashing of sword blades " ; the rushing host, the Powers who have passed through the " flaming lute-thronged angelic door," and to gaze upon whom is fatal. The whole mood is a yearning for release—for release from the body's prison, and for a union with some far life beyond " Fate and Time and Change."

IV

In these marvellous poems written between 1890 and 1899, Mr. Yeats's lyrical genius has reached its highest point. He has written beautiful lyrics since then, one or two, perhaps, quite as beautiful as anything he ever wrote, but no book of poems he has published since then can show anything like the same sustained quality of inspiration and execution. This earlier work is now collected in the two volumes called *Poems,* and *The Wind Among the Reeds;* and in the *Collected Works* it is printed under the general titles of *The Wind Among the Reeds, Ballads and Lyrics,* and *The Rose.* In these poems he gives us all, or nearly all, he has to give ; there is no side of his genius that they do not express. And once again I must insist on their absolute originality. Others following him have tried to write in this way—such an

attempt is Mr. Arthur Symons's Crying of the Waters, which would be a finer poem were it not so obviously derivative—but no one had written in this way before him.

The mention of The Crying of the Waters, with its richness of music so far beyond anything its author had attained to in his earlier verse, brings me to what is I think the greatest quality of all in Mr. Yeats's poetry—its sheer beauty of sound. In that it stands unrivalled save by a very few poems, such as Rossetti's Stream's Secret. The music of Poe, though delicate and wonderful, seems thin and a trifle metallic in comparison; the music of Swinburne shallow, jingling, save in a few pieces irritating in its untripping accuracy, its glittering, brilliant finish, its matchless skill that we are rarely allowed to forget.

O, women, kneeling by your altar rails long hence,
When songs I wove for my beloved hide the prayer,
And smoke from this dead heart drifts through the violet air
And covers away the smoke of myrrh and frankincense;
Bend down and pray for the great sin I wove in song,
Till Mary of the wounded heart cry a sweet cry,
And call to my beloved and me: "No longer fly
Amid the hovering, piteous, penitential throng."[1]

What music of any modern poet have we to set beside the slow, trailing splendour of those

[1] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, "Hanrahan Speaks to the Lovers of His Songs."

lines? Mr. Yeats's characteristic rhythms approach to the rhythms of nature. They are wavering, passionate, deliberately uncertain; now lingering, dying like faint echoes, now rich and full and triumphant as the breaking of the sea. Sometimes a poem opens out slowly, with a sort of spreading, increasing movement that breaks at last into a proud lonely magnificence of phrasing, as in the concluding lines of *The Rose of the World:*

> Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
> Before you were, or any hearts to beat,
> Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;
> He made the world to be a grassy road
> Before her wandering feet.[1]

Here, no doubt, much depends upon the solemn grandeur of a single phrase, which recalls the splendour of Milton's

> Where the bright Seraphim in burning row. . . .

This particular quality in Mr. Yeats's poetry, and in his prose also, is the more remarkable when we learn that he has no ear for music apart from words. That he has given, on the other hand, a closer study to the connection between poetry and music than most poets have, is apparent from his writings and from experiments prolonged over years. "I wrote," he says, "and still speak the verses that

[1] *Poems*, "The Rose of the World."

begin 'Autumn is over' to some traditional air, though I could not tell that air or any other on another's lips. . . . When, however, the rhythm is more personal than it is in these simple verses, the tune will always be original and personal, alike in the poet and in the reader who has the right ear; and these tunes will now and again have great beauty."[1] And he continues, "I am certain all poets, even all delighted readers of poetry, speak certain kinds of poetry to distinct and simple tunes, though the speaker may be deaf to ordinary music"; adding that "different tunes will fit different speakers or different moods."[2]

The tunes will, I think, vary; certainly, with different readers, but not nearly so much, and if really distinct tunes hardly at all, with different moods, particularly as they themselves help to create the mood. Poe's Annabel Lee, for instance, is to my sense written to so definite and elaborate a tune that it would be quite impossible to vary it. In Annabel Lee, indeed, I find the tune too pronounced, exercising a sort of tyranny over the meaning of the words, over the substance of the poem, throwing it, just as a composer's setting of any lyric invariably does, too much into the background.

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. iii, p. 235.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 234.

I prefer the less emphatic tunes of Mr. Yeats, which are written more in monotone, and with a greater subtlety and expressiveness. If I might put it in this way, I should say that the tune of Annabel Lee is external, is not inevitable, while Mr. Yeats's tunes are internal, are an integral part of the poem, tune and substance melting together so that the form and the sense are one.

Despite the subtlety of his rhythms, Mr. Yeats has perhaps sacrificed less to rhythm than any other poet has. The metre is never helped out by superfluous adjectives, his poetic style is in this respect as austere as the baldest prose style. A poet like Swinburne—I cannot help returning to him because his art affords such a complete contrast to that of Mr. Yeats—has a little list of words that come and go for no other purpose than to help out the lines to their allotted length, or to supply a rhyme. Vaguely poetic in sound, they have no particular meaning as they are applied. The most they do is not to get in the way of the sense, and repeated from poem to poem they become at last tedious in the extreme. Like coins whose inscriptions have become effaced by constant handling, it seems as if they must be remelted and recast before they can ever again be used. The art of Mr. Yeats is

innocent of any such labour-saving expedients. In the phrase of M. Jules Lemaître, he has no verses "faits d'avance." He may not always have been successful, but at least he never tries to *deceive* his reader. His prosody is based upon what Mr. Bridges has called "the natural speech-stress," rather than on that which is ordered by the "numeration of syllables," and a strict regularity of accent. Only, indeed, in this way could he get that admirable variety into his metres which makes their music so wonderful. As a rule, of course, the metre has syllabic regularity, but the accents, the pauses, are exquisitely varied, and in a poem like *The Host of the Air*, the metrical effect depends primarily upon this variation. If you have the right ear, his verse is the easiest verse in the world to read, because the tune coincides so exactly with the sense. Read it *for* the sense, indeed, and you cannot fail to read it rightly, the accent naturally falling on those syllables that must be stressed to give the tune its value. In other words, the rhythm is governed by "true speech-stresses," never, or very rarely, imposing, for the sake of metre, a false accent, which is not in the "natural speech-intonation." There are lyrics which have fine qualities, but which it is impossible to read aloud without sacrifice either

of the sense or of the music. That this defeats the principal end for which a lyric exists, ought to be obvious. Every misplaced accent, every rhyme that is but a rhyme for the printed page, and which the speaking voice cannot rest upon, is a blot, a fault in technique. You will find few such faults in Mr. Yeats's poems.

It seems to me that the vocal test is the final test for all style, whether prose or poetic, and that the style which cannot meet this test is of necessity, no matter how ingenious it may be, not first-rate. I remember in an ancient University hearing an eminent writer, himself, in his youth, a poet, reading aloud a number of lyrics, and whether he had a particularly alert eye for commas and semicolons I do not know, but the effect, to my ear at least, was that about a sixth part of what he read sounded like prose, and bad prose. I mention the incident simply because—failing at the time, and still failing, to perceive what pleasure was to be derived from a performance that nevertheless appeared to delight his audience—I think it would be impossible for the least sympathetic, the least sensitive reader to dish up Mr. Yeats after this fashion. The most such an interpreter could do would be to reduce to its minimum value the vocal quality of the poems;

he could never get rid of it, for they sing with their own music. All Mr. Yeats's experiments with the psaltery[1] and other instruments have been far from idle. The more verse is written with an idea that it may be beautifully spoken, the more perfect, technically, will it become, for the spoken word is intolerant alike of artificiality of form, and of triviality of substance.

[1] Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch made an instrument that was "half psaltery and half lyre" for the experiments which Miss Florence Farr and Mr. Yeats were making in the speaking of lyrics. At the end of vol. iii of the *Collected Works*, a number of these "lyric" tunes will be found noted down according to the ordinary method of musical notation. See, also, in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, the chapter on "Speaking to the Psaltery"; and the notes at the end of vol. iii of the *Collected Works*.

III

THE LYRICAL DRAMAS

I

I SHALL speak in this chapter of the three plays written before Mr. Yeats came finally under the spell of the theatre, and while the creation of lyrical beauty was still the supreme feature in his work. That dramatic poetry had always appealed to him is obvious. *The Island of Statues*, *The Seeker*, and *Mosada*, among his very earliest published work, are all cast in dramatic form; so, too, are several of the lyrics. But it was not till 1892 that he published his first play, *The Countess Cathleen*.

Of all Mr. Yeats's writings, with the exception of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *The Countess Cathleen* is probably the best known, though on the stage it has not proved so popular as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The scene of the drama is laid in the Ireland of old times, and the story, really more suitable to narrative than to drama, is unfolded with the utmost simplicity. A famine is in the land, and two demons, in the disguise of merchants, come offering gold to such peasants as will sell them their souls.

Cathleen, hearing of this lamentable traffic, sacrifices all her possessions to buy food for the people, but her grain ships are becalmed, the cattle she has bought in distant places are still a long way off, and her treasury has been robbed by the demons. Meanwhile the buying and selling of souls becomes a brisk commerce, and in despair she seizes upon the only plan by which she may save the starving people: she sells her own soul to the demons in exchange for the souls already bought, and for money to buy food enough to tide the survivors over the period of sickness and famine. She dies broken-hearted, but the demons have no power over that sinless soul, which is carried straightway up to God.

Mr. Yeats has said that "the play is purely symbolic. The two demons are the world, and the gold is simply the pride of the eye, and the peasants we have in our hearts, and the Countess Cathleen is simply a soul or human spirit which perpetually makes the sacrifice she made, which perpetually gives itself into captivity for the service of all good causes, and in the end wins peace, because every high motive is in the substance peace."[1]

[1] Speech delivered at a dinner given to the Irish Literary Theatre by the editor of *The Daily Express*, Mr. T. P. Gill, on the 9th of May, 1899.

If we accept this interpretation, which is, I imagine, of considerably later date than the composition of the play, we find ourselves at once in a world not so much of symbolism as of allegory: but I think *The Countess Cathleen* is really just what it is upon the surface, a folk-tale dramatized. It was one of the two plays with which the Irish Literary Theatre, on the evening of May the 8th, 1899, at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin, started, not too auspiciously, upon its adventurous career: but the final version of it, as it is now printed and acted, appeared only in 1912. Unlike the new versions of *The Land of Heart's Desire*, and *The Shadowy Waters*, this is by far the most perfect, showing a marked improvement both in strength and coherency. It still has not the sustained poetical beauty of the other two plays, nor, in my opinion, has a sort of patchiness in its construction been altogether removed, but it certainly lends itself more than anything else Mr. Yeats has written to the creation of beautiful stage pictures. Judged as a drama, I have never, personally, been able to find it very satisfying. The first scene as it now stands is managed with great skill, and the last scene is very beautiful and moving; but the rest of the play, in spite of the fine poetry to be found in it, is not upon the same

high level. It strikes me as lacking in imaginative reality; as being, indeed, fantastic rather than imaginative. In other words it does not, I think, produce its illusion. In *The Land of Heart's Desire*, in *The Shadowy Waters*, the illusion, to my sense, is perfect. We are carried into the fairy world of woods and waters, we are carried over those dreamy enchanted seas, and for the time we live there and nothing else is real. That is to say they are true, we accept them, our own life and experience melt into them, so that it would be impossible to say at what moment, or just where, we have crossed the threshold of dreamland. But in *The Countess Cathleen* I find no such magic. I am conscious that it is all impossible, a fairy-tale, something that I watch from outside, sceptically, and listen to as one listens to a fairy-tale. In the other pieces I have mentioned the words seem to spring up as it were from within my own imagination, the whole thing to be a spiritual experience, something that has happened and that therefore I know to be true, something that may happen again. I can believe in that pale child who has wandered from the home of the winds; I can believe in Forgael and Dectora; but I cannot believe in the owls with human faces, the man with "no mouth, nor eyes, nor ears," and because of

that they seem trivial. Are not the demon merchants, moreover, in their picturesqueness, a little too suggestive of the familiar demon of pantomime? No man can avoid that calamity —not Goethe, nor Marlowe—who anthropomorphizes his evil angels. They are thankless creatures at the best, and become 'stagey' exactly in proportion to their materialization. Mr. Yeats has taken over his demons bodily from an older convention; they have not passed through the re-creative fire of his imagination, and their very tangibility makes them unconvincing. Yet everything turns upon them; they are at the very centre of the drama; and it is doubtless this that, unless I fasten my mind upon certain isolated passages in it, makes the whole tragedy seem to me superficial.

To put it crudely, if the supernatural is going to be presented in a work of art at this time of day, it must be more 'done' than it is in *The Countess Cathleen*. In *The Countess Cathleen* it is somehow not 'done' at all. All that side of the drama is as artless and innocent as the bated breath of the nurse discoursing to round-eyed listeners of some time-honoured bogey guaranteed not to be *too* alarming. There is little or none of that brooding sense of terror which might have enforced convic-

tion. It is all too definite, too explicit, too childish really, for the high seriousness of the human side of the play. For if we don't feel the terror how can we feel the sacrifice? and if we don't feel the sacrifice what becomes of our tragedy? Emotionally, it is only in the last scene that it really begins to take fire, and voices begin to sigh up out of the deep.

Even setting aside this particular weakness, even for the moment accepting all the supernatural machinery, I must confess that I still think the author has not made the most of his subject. Cathleen's great renunciation comes too hurriedly, and with too little struggle. Just from that spiritual struggle might drama have emerged; and though it is more elaborated in the latest version than it was before, it can still scarcely be said to exist. It has been missed, or deliberately dropped, so that the sacrifice when it actually takes place (to be so quickly, as we all too fatally guess, followed by its reward) leaves us unmoved, and the whole motive of the piece falls to the ground. Beauty of detail we have, but beauty as a whole—no.

Judged impartially, this first play of Mr. Yeats's, then, cannot be pronounced successful. What is more, all the rewriting in the world could never make it successful. For though

we are far enough here—to turn again very briefly to the supernatural element—from the art of such things as La Mort de Tintagiles, or The Turn of the Screw, the main point is that there is no room in *The Countess Cathleen* for such art, which reflection brings us to the root of the whole matter. It is not the writing (how could it be with Mr. Yeats ?) nor the construction, that is at fault : it is the thankless nature of the subject itself, which is too poor, too unsubstantial, for dramatic treatment on this scale, the scale of great poetic tragedy. As a folk-tale it was touched with beauty, but Mr. Yeats, while accentuating the beauty, has left it still a folk-tale. The amount of labour that has been spent upon it, the lyrical beauty that has been squandered upon it with so lavish a hand (it is much the longest of his poetic plays), is quite disproportionate to the intrinsic value of the story to be told. In this connection, indeed, and casting a glance over Mr. Yeats's dramatic work as a whole, it must be confessed that he has been rather bewilderingly unfortunate in his choice of subjects. One hears a great deal about the wealth of ancient Irish literature, but if it has the richness which is claimed for it (and of which, up to the present, it has given but a slender proof of possessing), one can only come to the con-

clusion that Mr. Yeats has not an infallible flair for what is treatable. Why, if there is all that splendid, accumulated store of material to draw upon, should one spend years over *The Green Helmet,* and *Baile's Strand,* and *The King's Threshold,* and *The Countess Cathleen?* What sort of novel, or short story, one asks oneself, could be made out of any of these themes? Yet if we take any really big play—Hamlet, or Lear, or Henry IV, or Tartuffe, or George Dandin; or, coming to modern times, Les Corbeaux, or even such a thing as La Mort de Tintagiles—we can immediately see how the story-teller would have pounced upon it, had he had the luck to have come within pouncing distance. The fact is there as large as life, and these plays of Mr. Yeats's illustrate it, that with all the technique, all the style in the world, one cannot make a masterpiece out of nothing. Had Mr. Yeats looked less to the legends of the past, and more to his own imagination, his own experience of life, I am convinced that his dramas would have gained incalculably.

Certainly he did not find the subject of *The Land of Heart's Desire* in heroic chronicle, and it is, so far, his masterpiece; to my mind the most beautiful thing that has been done in our time. I admit at once that it is com-

paratively slight, but having said this I will not yield another inch. It has a radiant, delicious loveliness, a quality of inspiration, the exquisite freshness and fragrance of things destined to immortality. It has a unity of effect, a sustained poetic charm, that are unsurpassable. There is not a line in it that is not of direct creative value, and yet not a line that is not poetically beautiful. It is pagan in feeling, pagan in its mythopoeic quality, its spiritualization of nature. The child that dances on the floor brings into the cottage with her green dress all the greenness of the spring woodland outside; her rhythmic dance is the swaying of the rushes in the wind; her paleness is the paleness of water; her yellow hair has the yellowness of the crocus or the daffodil blazing, half-hidden, amid wet moss, or rich, cool grass.

The Land of Heart's Desire was put on at the Avenue Theatre, London, in the spring of 1894. The scene is laid in Sligo, and the time is May Eve, when the fairies, as everybody knows, have great power. The human persons in the play are old Maurteen Bruin and Bridget his wife, Shawn their son and his "newly-married bride," Mary, and Father Hart the parish priest. They are gathered in the farm kitchen toward the close of day, and old

Bridget has been scolding her son's wife for reading in a book of fairy lore, instead of helping her with the house-work. Bridget is bitter-tongued and shrewish, constantly nagging at the girl, who is inclined to be indolent, and is of a rather finer clay than the others. Presently they begin to talk a little of the "good people," the fairies, who have power to

> steal new-married brides
> After the fall of twilight on May Eve.

Mary Bruin goes to the door and scatters primroses outside, strewing

> a golden path
> For them to bring good luck into the house:

and with this the first warning note occurs:

> I had no sooner flung them by the door
> Than the wind cried and hurried them away;
> And then a child came running in the wind
> And caught them in her hands and fondled them:
> Her dress was green; her hair was of red gold;
> Her face was pale as water before dawn.

They question one another as to whose child this can be, and in the midst of their questioning a knock comes at the door. Mary Bruin opens it to "a little queer old woman" who begs "a porringer of milk," which the girl gives her; thus bringing upon herself a further scolding from old Bridget, who knows that on May Eve the good people set traps for unwary

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mortals, and that the house that gives them food and fire comes into their power for a year. But the girl's mind is still running on her book and she pays little heed to the old woman. A few minutes later, in answer to another knock, she again goes to the door, and this time gives "a burning sod" to a little old man who has asked for it to light his pipe. Bridget now, in mingled fear and anger, pours out a torrent of abuse upon her daughter-in-law, calling her a "good-for-nothing wife," reproaching her with her idleness, and the girl is stung to reply. At last in a kind of recklessness, and partly to revenge herself on the men, her husband and her father-in-law, who in their timidity allow her to be treated in this way, she calls openly to the invisible powers that all now feel to be close at hand.

> Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house!
> Let me have all the freedom I have lost;
> Work when I will and idle when I will!

Shawn and Father Hart try to restore peace, and presently, as the girl begins to grow gentle in response to her young husband's love, she begins to be afraid, for from far away she hears a strange voice calling. She clings to Shawn as the voice draws nearer:

> O, guard me close,
> Because I have said wicked things to-night. . . .

But the voice is now heard singing rapturously just outside the door, and old Maurteen, who recognizes only the song of a human child, goes to invite the singer to enter. The child comes in and is made welcome. They listen to "her strange and dreamy talk," but, deceived by her appearance, attach no meaning to it.

> And when I tire of this warm little house,
> There is one here who must away, away. . . .

Still seeing in her only a human child, they coax and pet her, and when she is frightened at the figure of Christ upon the cross, the priest himself takes down the crucifix and carries it into another room. Then the child dances for them, and gradually as she dances begins to lure the soul of Mary Bruin to the Land of Heart's Desire. A faint music is heard calling in the wind, and they begin to realize that this is no child, but a mighty spirit, and gather about the priest for protection. He is powerless, having removed the crucifix, and when he would go to bring it back again, they cling to him in terror, and will not let him leave them. The child strews primroses between herself and the priest, and round about Mary Bruin.

> You shall go with me, newly-married bride,
> And gaze upon a merrier multitude; . . .
> Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
> But joy is wisdom, Time an endless song.
> I kiss you and the world begins to fade.

Shawn tries to keep his wife, appealing to her love :

> Beloved, do not leave me !
> Remember when I met you by the well
> And took your hand in mine and spoke of love.

But she is already lost to him and to the past, and when she speaks it is as one who speaks out of a dream :

> Dear face ! Dear voice !

The child continues to lure her away :

> White bird, white bird, come with me, little bird.
> . . . . . .
> Come, little bird with crest of gold !

Mary makes a last faint effort, that is like a movement in sleep.

> Come, little bird with silver feet !

Suddenly they see that the child is gone, and Shawn rushing to his wife flings his arms round her, but it is too late, and he clasps no more than a " drift of leaves, or bole of an ash-tree." Outside a voice is heard singing in triumph, and within and without the house the song is taken up by a multitude of voices :

> The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
> The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
> And the lonely of heart is withered away,
> While the faeries dance in a place apart,
> Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
> Tossing their milk-white arms in the air ;
> For they hear the wind laugh, and murmur and sing
> Of a land where even the old are fair,

And even the wise are merry of tongue ;
But I heard a reed of Coolaney say,
" When the wind has laughed and murmured and sung,
The lonely of heart must wither away."

In writing of *The Land of Heart's Desire* here, I have not followed the final version but an earlier one, for in 1912 the play was unfortunately revised by Mr. Yeats, each alteration being introduced obviously for the theatre's sake, so that we now have lines like these :

Shawn, this is half empty ;
Go, bring up the best bottle that we have.

This last version[1] is indeed difficult to understand. To work over *The Countess Cathleen*, which never hung very well together, and was obviously most uneven in execution, was a very different thing from working over a play that had all the rounded perfection of a lyric. Even the best of the new verses have a ruggedness that breaks in harshly upon the melodious sensuous beauty of the old verses, and moreover some of the loveliest passages have been removed. It might be instructive to give one or two examples of these changes, and let the reader decide for himself. Let him turn back to those lines I have quoted, beginning, " I had no sooner flung them by the door."

[1] It is the early version that is printed in the present edition (1908) of the *Collected Works*.

Instead of strewing primroses, Mary now hangs up a branch of quicken wood; and the lines go:

> I had no sooner hung it on the nail
> Before a child ran up out of the wind;
> She has caught it in her hand and fondled it;
> Her face is pale as water before dawn.

All the music has disappeared. Even the beauty of the last line, which contains but a slight verbal change, is spoiled because of those that precede it. The passage has no longer the delicious liquid murmur it once had, but is fragmentary, and the third line is positively ugly.

Instead of the beautiful verses, with the exquisite, unexpected, yet so natural image of the red nasturtium:

> O, you are the great door-post of this house,
> And I, the red nasturtium, climbing up:

we have now the more commonplace, and again less musical:

> O, you are the great door-post of this house,
> And I the branch of blessed quicken wood.

Where the child in the old version spoke thus:

> Old mother, my old mother, the green dawn
> Brightens above while you blow up the fire;
> And evening finds you spreading the white cloth:

she is now made to say:

> From dawn, when you must blow the fire ablaze,
> You work your fingers to the bone, old mother.

What gave the lines their poetic value—" the green dawn brightens above you "—has been omitted. The crooning, dreamy note struck by the first words has also disappeared.

Though I have never seen, and assuredly never shall see, the play acted, I can guess *why* certain of these changes have been made. I can guess, for instance, that the first was made to enable Mary Bruin to stand at the open door and describe to the others what at that moment is actually going on outside, and that she does this because it appears more dramatic to Mr. Yeats than if she were merely to tell them of it after she had come back into the room. At all events, if this is not the reason I can conceive of no other.

Even such a slight change as the dropping out of a single word in the line " Queen of the Angels and kind Saints, defend us ! " which now runs, " Queen of Angels and kind saints defend us ! " seems to me to weaken it, to take from it, when read with its context, something of its lingering, ecstatic quality. Such things, of course, as this last, are a mere matter of ear, and of ear alone, and in making these remarks, and one or two I shall have to make about *The Shadowy Waters*, though I feel certain I am right, I should like to make them as little dogmatically as possible.

II

The Shadowy Waters I am about to consider is not the second published version, which was in verse; nor the third published version, which is in verse and prose and is called the "acting version"; but the first published version, which was a dramatic poem of exquisite if highly exotic beauty, and was printed in a book by itself in 1900, a new edition appearing in 1901. I believe that other new editions will be printed in times to come, for poetry like this is too rare to be forgotten or wasted:—let it suffice to say that at present it is not to be found in the *Collected Works*.

Mr. Yeats has been writing *The Shadowy Waters* for the greater part of his life. He began it, he told me, when he was a boy, and it has undergone as many transformations as "mighty Proteus, the ancient one of the sea."[1] "A. E." told me that Mr. Yeats when he was nineteen or twenty had already composed a version of *The Shadowy Waters*. At this stage it was the story of a man who seeks to escape from himself through love. He meets and loves a woman who is in love with someone else. By casting a spell over her he makes her forget the old passion, and at the same time awakens

[1] *Odyssey*, iv, 365 (trans. Butcher and Lang).

in her a new passion, which is for himself. But he finds now that she is merely an instrument obeying his will, merely expresses his own emotions and desires, and that he has not really achieved what he sought. Seeing his delusion he leaves her, and sets out on his quest over the Shadowy Waters.

This version, "A. E." says, was full of beauty, and Yeats took it with him when he went to live in London. Some years later, in London, the two poets met again, and "A. E." listened to a new version of *The Shadowy Waters*. It was different, full now of a kind of grey loveliness that was, in its way, as beautiful as the other, more coloured, beauty had been. But its author was still dissatisfied. The idea now seemed to him cold, the idea of leaving the woman behind: and a third tale was woven, in which Forgael takes the spell-bound Dectora with him into the land of immortal things. This was the version eventually to be published, written finally under the influence of that famous phrase of Mallarmé's, so that the words "take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones"—*s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries*[1]—and this is the version before me as I write.

[1] Mallarmé, *Vers et Prose*, p. 192.

The Shadowy Waters is more deeply pondered, more elaborated, and patiently perfected, than any other of Mr. Yeats's writings. It is a dream poem. It has no plot, or perhaps it would be better to say that the plot is simply the mood in which the play is written. To read it is to float "beyond the misty borders of the world," to float on and on "to the streams where the world ends." Everywhere are "cloudy waters and glimmering winds," and "the dreams the drowsy gods breathe on the burnished mirror of the world." Over all there hangs

> the sleep that is in pools
> Among great trees, and in the wings of owls,
> And under lovers' eyelids.

It is the poem of the quest of the ideal—here a love that shall be something more than "brief longing and deceiving hope and bodily tenderness." This love is in reality a symbol: it is any spiritual ideal, any passionate faith that seeks perfection, for "we love nothing but the perfect, and our dreams make all things perfect, that we may love them."[1]

Forgael, a king whom the gods have made wise with dreams, has sailed into the "waters that no pilot knows," guided by grey birds

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 231.

who are the souls of men, in search of this divine love. For "three moons" his galley has been following the grey wise birds through the misty waters, and when the play opens the sailors are weary, anxious to return home, and ready to kill Forgael if Aibric, his friend, will agree to steer them back to their own country. But in the midst of their plotting another ship drifts to them out of the fog.

> . . . one old man
> Nods by the helm, and nearer to the sail
> A woman lies among embroideries.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> A boy and girl hold one another's hands;
> Their hair mingles on some stringed instrument,
> And a string murmurs as though Time were dead
> Or a god hid them under the shadow of wings.

This ship, as may be imagined, is not very difficult to capture, and the woman, under the spell woven by Forgael's magic harp, forgets the king, her husband, who has just been slain. As Forgael plays she struggles against the enchantment that is closing about her.

> No, no, be silent,
> For I am certain somebody is dead.

But when she awakes, she awakens to that enchanted love, and it is now that Forgael speaks to her of the other, divine love, which

he has been seeking. She does not understand him :

> The love I know is hidden in these hands
> That I would mix with yours, and in this hair
> That I would shed like twilight over you.

Forgael : . . . love is made
Imperishable fire under the boughs
Of chrysoberyl and beryl and chrysolite.
. . . . . .

Dectora : Where are these boughs? Where are the holy woods
That can change love to imperishable fire ?

She begs him to return home where they can " rule together."

> Love was not made for darkness and the winds
> That blow when heaven and earth are withering,
> For love is kind and happy.

But to Forgael, intoxicated by his vision, her words are light as air, and at last, in scorn, he would send her home in her own ship with Aibric and the sailors, while he follows his quest alone.

Dectora : I will follow you,
Living or dying. . . .

Forgael : I will have none of you,
My love shakes out her hair upon the streams
Where the world ends. . . .

Dectora : I will follow you.
I have cut the rope that bound this galley to ours,
And while she fades and life withers away
I crown you with this crown. . . .

So they drift on into the unknown and the curtain descends, shutting them away from us.

If the success of a work of art depend upon the perfection with which the artist has realized and made concrete a mood, *The Shadowy Waters* must be admitted to be flawless. It is impossible that anything could be more filled with atmosphere. It has a heavy, delicious, drowsy beauty, like a thing dreamed in a weariness of life, or in some not quite natural sleep. The fresh woodland charm, which was what made *The Land of Heart's Desire* so attractive, is altogether gone. *The Shadowy Waters* is the last autumnal echo of Mr. Yeats's great period, the decade from 1890 to 1900. It is purely as a poem that it must be judged. It might be made beautiful upon the stage by actors with beautiful voices, who were content to think only of the music of the lines they were speaking, but it could never be made dramatic. Less than in any other of the plays is there even an attempt at characterization. Forgael and Dectora are spirits wandering lonely as stars in the black void of space. If they were human beings the whole conception of this enchanted love would strike us as immoral and odious, essentially ignoble. Yet, in one sense, they are real, have a meaning and a life. Only this life is wholly different from

that of the figures in more realistic drama. It is a life that flows through them from the mind of their creator, like music from a violin : they are but the mirrors in which we read different aspects of that mind. They are like the moon, shining with a borrowed radiance ; and yet it might be pleaded that they are, strictly speaking, neither remote nor inhuman, because they embody each a human emotion, and express it in words of a very moving loveliness. The pleading for human love, the love of the woman shuddering back from the icy rapture of the longing for an impossible perfection—the desire of the artist and the saint—that is the subject ; and there is nothing in the play but these two almost disembodied loves.

The later versions of *The Shadowy Waters*, which differ only slightly one from another, are so entirely different from this first version, that it might well have found a place beside them in the *Collected Works*. The later versions are made, as Mr. Yeats makes everything now, for the stage. There is something ironic in the fact that he should labour so tirelessly for an audience which, though it may be larger than the audience his poems brought him, can never, in the nature of things, care nearly so intensely for his work, has indeed never cared much for any of his plays, with the exception

of *Cathleen ni Houlihan.* "Some of my friends, and it is always for a few friends one writes, do not understand why I have not been content with lyric writing. But one can only do what one wants to do, and to me drama . . . has been the search for more of manful energy, more cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events, and for clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret." [1]

That is well said, and quite unanswerable, but it is an argument for the work of the present and has no bearing whatever upon this habit of tinkering with work that was written years ago. The original idea of *The Shadowy Waters* certainly did not spring from a mood of "cheerful acceptance," and no addition of "manful" Shakespearian sailors "lecherous with abstinence" till they'd "give the profit of nine voyages for that red Moll that had but one eye" will make it appear "cheerful" even to the average playgoer. That Mr. Yeats should have cast it in its present form seems to argue a certain blindness to all save one idea. The success or failure of the thing was so absolutely a matter of his getting or not getting his atmosphere, that it is difficult to understand how he can

[1] *Poems*, 1899–1905, p. xii.

have failed to see this. What he offers us now instead of atmosphere is a robuster rhythm in the verse. It is as if d'Annunzio were to rewrite The Virgins of the Rocks in the manner of Mr. Kipling.

A word as to the verse in which these plays are written. Mr. Yeats has been accused of breaking the laws of blank verse, of ignoring accent, of writing lines that "won't scan." To my ear, reading the verse naturally, according to the sense, there are few unmusical lines, while as a whole it is exquisitely melodious. The large proportion of monosyllabic endings and of "stopped endings," endings that reach a natural pause at the close of the line, is remarkable. The norm of the ten-syllable iambic line is never too frequently departed from; the inversions of stress, which occur not only in the first foot, but also, though rarely, in each of the other feet, invariably justify themselves by the beauty of their effect.

Dò not blàme me; I often lie awake. . . .

A voice sìnging on a May Eve like this. . . .

So black, bìtter, blìnding, and sudden a storm. . . .

For are not they, likèwise, chìldren of God. . . .

Let Him that made mankind, the àngels and dèvils. . . .

This last twelve-syllable line, with the fourth and fifth foot amphibrachic, is daring enough; and certainly there are one or two lines into which it seems impossible, without distorting them, to get a blank-verse rhythm.

Seven odours, | seven murmurs, | seven woods. . . .

It is obvious that there can be only one way of reading this: yet the sound, in its place, bringing with it a kind of full pause, is delightfully right.

And again:

Once | a fly | dancing | in a beam | of the sun,
Or the light | wind | blowing | out of | the dawn,
Could fill your heart with dreams none other knew.

I can only read these lines as I have marked them, but they are certainly beautiful. On the other hand, three hurried lines, repeated twice in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, strike me as clumsy enough:

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.

Probably the following lines from the prologue to *The Shadowy Waters* show as much shifting of pause and stress, and variation of length, as could be found in any passage of equal length Mr. Yeats has written:

How shall I name you, immortal, mild, proud shadows?
I only know | that all we know | comes from you,
And that you come from Eden on flying feet.
Is Eden far away, or do you hide
From human thought, as hares and mice and coneys
That run before the reaping-hook and lie
In the last ridge of the barley? || Do our woods
And winds | and ponds | cover more quiet woods,
More shining winds, | more star-glimmering ponds?

Of course it is by the ear alone that such departures from regularity as we find, say, in the last of these lines, can be judged. I confess that to my ear the whole passage sounds perfectly musical.

IV

PROSE TALES AND SKETCHES

I

SIDE by side with his verse Mr. Yeats has always written prose, and in considering the latter we must to some extent go back over ground already trodden. *John Sherman* and *Dhoya*, by Ganconagh, was published in 1891. The author's name, it will be observed, does not appear upon the title page, but less, I imagine, because he did not want to see it there, than because his publisher decided that the tale would go better as a contribution to that once popular series, the "Pseudonym Library," of which it formed volume ten. *Dhoya* may be passed over as a pleasing trifle, but *John Sherman* is really interesting, not only for its own sake as a story, but because it is Mr. Yeats's solitary attempt to write a novel of modern life. For it is really not a short story, but a full-blown novel in miniature, divided into five parts and twenty-six chapters. Though its hero bears little resemblance to Mr. Yeats (Katharine Tynan, on

the other hand, thinks there is a good deal of Yeats in him), the book probably was written to express that home-sickness which he felt during his first years in London. He has expressed it better in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, the subject of *John Sherman* being, as I have already mentioned, but that of the *Lake Isle* slightly elaborated, and enlivened by the introduction of one or two more sophisticated characters, who act as a foil to the simple, stolid, yet not unimaginative hero, and by a sort of innocent intrigue, which is treated with a curious mingling of shrewdness and *naïveté*.

Judged as a novel, it is a failure; but there is something in its very amateurishness, in its unpretentiousness, which is pleasant enough to disarm criticism. And indeed criticism can scarcely touch a thing that is so eminently artless, a "comedy of manners," a psychological study unfolded as simply as, and with all the "short cuts" of, a nursery tale. The curate, the fascinating London lady, the tennis-club, the love-making—these are described in brief, quaint chapters, whose summary method rather reminds one of the explanatory inscriptions a little boy writes beneath his drawings. The dialogue is often stiff and stilted; each scene in the story is not so much written as noted in a kind of impatient shorthand. Yet

when all this has been granted, something remains over, one definite emotion at least emerges, and that is just Sherman's feeling for his native town of Sligo, which occupies almost as important place in the story as Bruges does in Rodenbach's famous novel. It is this alone that gives the tale such actuality as it can lay claim to; this alone that gives their faint, delicate fragrance, as of rain-washed grass, to the descriptive passages; this that leaves upon the mind of the reader an impression of a charming old-world pensiveness. Its very limitations give the story—even in the London scenes—a distinct atmosphere. Nothing could be more unsophisticated and homely, using these words in their best sense, in the sense in which one might apply them to a few of Hawthorne's happiest sketches. "The town was dripping, but the rain was almost over. The large drops fell seldomer and seldomer into the puddles. It was the hour of ducks. Three or four had squeezed themselves under a gate, and were now splashing about in the gutter of the main street."[1] There is no denying that that has charm, and it is, allowing for the difference of style, a distinctly Hawthornesque charm. But where Hawthorne, at his best, was a master of his art, and

[1] *John Sherman*, p. 7.

of every kind of grace, Mr. Yeats is still fumbling with a material he cannot quite control. It is all very ingenuous, tinged by what might perhaps be called a delicate rusticity of feeling. The tennis-club in this respect is rather a joy. It is as if Mr. Yeats had peeped through the railings and wondered what they were doing. Yet there are subtleties too. The hint of slyness in Sherman's nature is true to his race: the description of his interest in the fourteen dead flies on the office ceiling is as revealing and significant as such things are in Flaubert, performing the purpose of a whole page of analysis.

It would be a mistake, however, to dwell too long upon what is, after all, only an experiment—an experiment, too, which Mr. Yeats never followed up, and which is really more or less unrelated to the rest of his work. If one of the main characteristics of *John Sherman* is its artlessness, this certainly cannot be said of *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), though the general note of that book is of an almost equal simplicity. I can, indeed, quite imagine that there may be readers who care a great deal for *The Celtic Twilight* and for a few of the earlier verses, and not at all for anything Mr. Yeats has written since. For in spite of its title, which might suggest an

atmosphere of mysticism, it is really distinguished from all Mr. Yeats's later work by the comparative absence of that particular quality. We have instead a freshness, a humour, a kind of happy charm that breathes the spirit of youth and of nature. Many of its chapters might have been written in the open air, and one gets from them a pleasure that is like the pleasure one gets from lingering on a sunny spring morning in leafy places. In the distance we may catch now and then a sudden gleam of light reflected from the dazzling temple of the Secret Rose, but close at hand, and all around us, are the things we know, rural homely scenes, with cottages and farmyards scattered over the country-side, and perhaps a fairy or two hiding under a hawthorn bush.

Based upon a notebook Mr. Yeats carried with him on his rambles about Sligo, it consists of little sketches and tales, in some of which we find the germs of several of the later lyrics. Scraps of autobiography, youthful memories, scraps of folk-lore, the gossip of fairyland, descriptions of nature and of people who are very close to nature, are all mingled together in a delightful medley that makes the book unique. For it is the notebook of a poet—a poet who has found his "holy land

where he first crept upon the floor" [1]—and everything that it contains is transformed by the spirit of poetry. Even the slightest chapter, where all are slight, is touched with beauty. Nothing, moreover, that he has done is more of the soil. An ideal book, especially in its original dainty format, to slip into one's pocket before setting out for a day's tramp among the hills or along the river bank; a book filled with a spirit he was never to recapture, which he never indeed sought to recapture. The reader who has not the original edition has but to compare the later chapters, which are all dated, with the earlier, undated chapters, to see exactly what I mean.

It is, of course, with news from fairyland that we are principally concerned. Few, I suppose, know better than Mr. Yeats does, those wayward mischievous creatures, "happy enough, but doomed to melt out at the last judgment like bright vapour."

> A man has the fields of heaven,
> But soulless a fairy dies,
> As a leaf that is old, and withered, and cold,
> When the wintry vapours rise.[2]

So he writes in *The Island of Statues*, and so the belief has ever been. They are the last

[1] *Discoveries*, "The Holy Places."
[2] *The Island of Statues.*

remains of an older paganism, and of their good or bad nature we get astonishingly different accounts. Drumcliff and Rosses are the places where they are to be found thickest. "At the northern corner of Rosses is a little promontory of sand and rocks and grass: a mournful, haunted place. No wise peasant would fall asleep under its low cliff, for he who sleeps here may wake 'silly,' the 'good people' having carried off his soul. There is no more ready short-cut to the dim kingdom than this plovery headland, for, covered and smothered now from sight by mounds of sand, a long cave goes thither. . . ."[1] And in Ben Bulben, the "mountain of Gulben" of *The Secret Rose*, there is a door that leads straight into fairyland. "A little north of the town of Sligo, on the southern side of Ben Bulben, some hundreds of feet above the plain, is a small white square in the limestone. No mortal has ever touched it with his hand; no sheep or goat has ever browsed grass beside it. There is no more inaccessible place upon the earth, and few more encircled by awe to the deep considering. It is the door of fairyland. In the middle of night it swings open, and the unearthly troop rushes out."[2]

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 149.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

How far Mr. Yeats himself actually believes in the "secret commonwealth" it is difficult to know. I have never been able to discover in his writings more than a half-belief—that imaginative belief which Shakespeare may have had when he wrote A Midsummer Night's Dream—and I do not think there is really more than that. So much indeed probably is implied when he says, "It is far easier to be sensible in cities than in many country places I could tell you of. When one walks on those grey roads at evening by the scented elder bushes of the white cottages, watching the faint mountains gathering the clouds upon their heads, one all too readily discovers, beyond their cobweb veil of the senses, those creatures, the goblins, hurrying from the white square to the north, or from the Heart Lake in the south."[1]

There are writers who claim a much firmer faith than this:—Mr. Wentz in his exhaustive work, Fairy-faith in Celtic Countries; Mr. Hewlett in Lore of Proserpine; though the latter gives his whole case away by the inclusion of the chapter called "Quidnunc," which is but a literary conceit of a very modern turn. The genuine belief, as we find it still deeply rooted among the unlettered classes in the

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 128.

country districts of Ireland, is quite different in kind from this. They do not believe because they want to believe, but because things happen. Their faith is characterized by the complete absence of just that fancifulness which distinguishes Mr. Hewlett's chapters. For the things that *do* happen are singularly unpoetic, unsuitable to the purpose of the literary artist who would mould them to any kind of rounded form. They are, too, curiously lacking in variety. It is practically the same tale over and over again, a tale as unromantic and humdrum as a newspaper paragraph. Many stories are connected with the strangeness, the unhumanness, of those whose wits have wandered, and who, because of a too close intermarriage, are always commoner in country than in town. These "innocents" are supposed to have been taken by the "good people," sometimes in body, sometimes in spirit. It is from such unhallowed unions between mortal and fairy that all fairy children are born. The persons who have been lured or carried forcibly to fairyland, are said to be "away," and most of the tales turn on such simple happenings, and need no more than a few sentences for their telling. Even in Ireland ghosts are much commoner than fairies. I remember one evening some years ago, when

I was sitting in the kitchen of a farmhouse in Donegal, the arrival of two young cyclists, breathless and scared, who had been chased by a ghost that haunted a river a mile or two away. This ghost was well known, being connected with a rather ugly murder, and on the evening in question it would appear to have been seized with a lust for vengeance, crying horribly as it pursued the bicycles right up to the garden gate. One of the youths had dropped his hat upon the way, but nothing would induce him to go back for it. And not far away from the same house, in the opposite direction, was another but quite harmless ghost, who haunted near a disused lime-kiln.

The deep-rooted nature of these beliefs could not, I think, be better vouched for than it is in the following very prosaic case. In January 1914, in Donegal, a servant girl, from some motive of spite or revenge, burned £300 in Ulster Bank notes belonging to her employers. Yet, though the money was at once missed, she was allowed to leave their house and service unsuspected, the loss being put down to the malice of the Fanad ghosts, or "the wee folks of Inishowen." The girl, who was quite illiterate, and did not know that a bank-note could be for more than a single pound, afterwards confessed to what

she had done. The case was tried at Lifford Quarter Sessions, and was reported in the daily papers. Under cross-examination it was discovered that a grandfather's clock in the hall had stopped simultaneously with the disappearance of the money, a mysterious coincidence which, to those concerned, pointed conclusively to the fact that either a ghost or a fairy had taken refuge inside it.

Given this condition of mind, it is but natural that ghosts should flicker through the pages of *The Celtic Twilight* thick as flies in bracken. Drumcliff and Rosses, according to Mr. Yeats, "are chokeful of ghosts," and "the custom is still common hereabouts of sprinkling the doorstep with the blood of a chicken on the death of a very young child, thus drawing into the blood the evil spirits from the too weak soul." [1] There are so many ghosts, in fact, that in certain villages the problem of how to avoid them after dusk presents considerable difficulties.

A man was once heard complaining, "By the cross of Jesus! how shall I go? If I pass by the hill of Dunboy old Captain Burney may look out on me. If I go round by the water, and up by the steps, there is the headless one and another on the quays, and a new one under the old churchyard wall. If I go

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 157.

right round the other way, Mrs. Stewart is appearing at Hillside Gate, and the devil himself is in the Hospital Lane."[1]

The devil, indeed, is only too ready to appear, sometimes in rather eccentric form. A woman who was "out on the road late at night waiting for her young man," saw something come "flapping and rolling along the road up to her feet. It had the likeness of a newspaper, and presently it flapped up into her face, and she knew by the size of it that it was The Irish Times. All of a sudden it changed into a young man, who asked her to go walking with him. She would not, and he vanished."[2]

A hole in the Sligo River is haunted by a water-goblin.

When I was a small boy (Mr. Yeats says) I fished one day for congers in the monster hole. Returning home, a great eel on my shoulder, his head flapping down in front, his tail sweeping the ground behind, I met a fisherman of my acquaintance. I began a tale of an immense conger, three times larger than the one I carried, that had broken my line and escaped. "That was him," said the fisherman. "Did you ever hear how he made my brother emigrate? My brother was a diver, you know, and grubbed stones for the Harbour Board. One day

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 25.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

the beast comes up to him, and says, 'What are you after?' 'Stones, sur,' says he. 'Don't you think you had better be going?' 'Yes, sur,' says he. And that's why my brother emigrated."[1]

Many of the tales in *The Celtic Twilight* were told to Mr. Yeats by "a little bright-eyed old man" named Paddy Flynn. "The first time I saw him he was cooking mushrooms for himself; the next time he was asleep under a hedge, smiling in his sleep."[2] That sentence really gives the character of the book better than any description of it can. It is quite innocent of any attempt at arrangement or classification. Mr. Yeats wanders about the country-side in pursuit of fairies very much as Mr. Hudson does in pursuit of birds. The scientific spirit is not here, but everywhere we see the touch of the poet, and the book is a living thing. We have not only the tales, but the people who tell them, and the setting, the surroundings, all given with a delightful personal note, and with a humour that we find in no other of his writings.

Into most of the sketches added nearly ten years later an element of mysticism has entered, overshadowing the fresher, lighter

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 181.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

gayer and more natural qualities of the earlier chapters.

II

This same spirit of mysticism broods over every word of those strange and sometimes disquieting stories that are gathered together under the title of *The Secret Rose*. The book is of a much more serious and subjective nature than *The Celtic Twilight*. Mr. Yeats no longer speaks for others, but for himself, and the atmosphere of folk-lore and fireside tale is replaced by a darker atmosphere, through which flame wild unearthly lights that lure the soul to its destruction.

The stories of *The Secret Rose* have all the profound inwardness of the poems. The substance is, indeed, very similar—that endless war of the spiritual upon the material world; and the prose as prose, has the same melodious and vocal quality as the verse has as verse. It seems made for reading aloud. To pass from verse to prose is still to remain in the same world. The beat of the rhythm becomes hardly less musical, but only a little less accentuated, moving in broader waves of sound. The prose that he writes in this book, and in the *Ideas of Good and Evil*, is elaborate in the extreme, yet it is not precious. It has none

of the purple patches of an inferior and slightly vulgar artist like Wilde. Its peculiar, haunting quality depends in great measure on a richness of metaphor, on an imaginative use of words as if they were living things, with a power and a life that can be commanded as Prospero ruled his spirits. Mr. Yeats's vocabulary is not large. Unlike another modern master of style, Mr. Henry James, he never uses either 'dictionary words'—such a word as 'interlocutor,' for example—which exist only for the printed page, or words taken from the slang of the day; and the elaboration of his style has not yet begun to make it difficult. There are few very long, no involved, sentences. His style, unlike the later style of Meredith or James, does not make use of any eccentricity of pattern or construction. It is without lightness and buoyancy, the exquisite delicacy of touch which distinguishes the prose of an Anatole France (whose style is certainly the most perfect of all styles), but it is admirably suited to his matter, his purpose. The rhythm is monotonous and full, with, at its best, a dark magnificence of colour, that is like the colour on the wings of a moth; while the imagery he uses is largely the same as that employed in the poems. In *Rosa Alchemica* the rich, sombre beat of the rhythm

is more pronounced than in any other of the stories, and this, too, is appropriate, for our senses must be drugged almost to the verge of trance before the occult world begins to glow and flame against the blackness beyond. I know of no writer since Jeremy Taylor who gets so splendid and rich a harmony as Mr. Yeats gets in certain passages of *The Secret Rose* :—

Some believed that he found his eternal abode among the demons, and some that he dwelt henceforth with the dark and dreadful goddesses, who sit all night among the pools in the forest watching the constellations rising and setting in those desolate mirrors.[1]

He was of those ascetics of passion who keep their hearts pure for love or for hatred as other men for God, for Mary and for the saints, and who, when the hour of their visitation arrives, come to the Divine Essence by the bitter tumult, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the desolate Rood ordained for immortal passions in mortal hearts.[2]

Let me set beside these passages a passage from Taylor's Holy Dying :—

For so the wild foragers of Lybia, being spent with heat, and dissolved by the too fond kisses of the sun, do melt with their common fires, and die with faint-

[1] *The Secret Rose*, p. 24.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

ness, and descend with motions slow and unable to the little brooks that descend from heaven in the wilderness; and when they drink, they return into the vigour of a new life, and contract strange marriages; and the lioness is courted by a panther, and she listens to his love, and conceives a monster that all men call unnatural, and the daughter of an equivocal passion and of a sudden refreshment.[1]

But at this point, as, alas! so frequently happens, I am drawn up sharply by the contrast presented by existing texts; all that I have said of his style applying more essentially to the older text, and to those stories, *Rosa Alchemica*, *The Tables of the Law*, *The Adoration of the Magi*, which have been left unchanged; and to those other stories, *The Binding of the Hair*, *The Rose of Shadow*, *The Book of the Great Dhoul*, which are no longer published with *The Secret Rose;* and to the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil;* rather than to the rewritten tales. The *Red Hanrahan* stories, which were originally included in *The Secret Rose*, have indeed been so thoroughly revised that they quite cease to belong to this, his middle period, and need not be considered here. What, however, probably very few of his readers on our side of the Atlantic know, is that there exists a revised edition of the

[1] *Holy Dying*, chap. v, sec. 8.

stories of *The Secret Rose* proper. It has been published in America, but never in this country. The versions printed in the *Collected Works*, and in the English new editions of *The Secret Rose*, follow the original text. In the American revised edition, *Rosa Alchemica* remains practically unchanged, but all the other tales have been subjected to a greater or lesser amount of revision, though the alterations affect the form alone. I have found it more difficult to choose between the two texts here than anywhere else in Mr. Yeats's work. The rewriting of the stories has undoubtedly improved them in some respects, while it has weakened them in others. The simplifying of the proper names is a distinct, though it may appear a slight, advantage; but, in the simplification of the style, too frequently the rhythm has been sacrificed, simplicity sometimes being obtained by the very drastic method of cutting off the latter half of a sentence, or by lifting a clause out of the middle of a sentence while leaving the beginning and the end untouched. The prose—how could it be otherwise?—no longer flows with quite the old mellifluous sleepy melody. It is balder, more broken, not only for the reason I have given, but because many of those wonderful images which Mr. Yeats, like Taylor, scattered with so lavish

a hand up and down his pages, have been removed. It is difficult to see why a beautiful simile like this should be struck out from the story of *Costello the Proud* :—

> He rode . . . on over the Mountains of the Ox, and down towards the sea; his eyes almost continually resting upon the moon which glimmered in the dimness like a great white rose hung on the lattice of some boundless and phantasmal world.[1]

The sentence now ends with the word "moon," and this is a fair enough example of Mr. Yeats's method of revision, of the kind of loss the stories have suffered. What they have gained, on the other hand, is a certain rapidity of movement. They have shaken off much of their solemnity, and those to whom in the first instance the story was the main thing, will have little quarrel with their present form. For myself, I cling obstinately to the older text, while admitting that familiarity with it may to some extent be responsible for this preference. What is doubtless the important thing, the thing to rejoice in, is that both texts are extremely beautiful.

The Secret Rose is a collection of Irish tales, some founded upon old legends, some invented by their author, but all in the highest

[1] *The Secret Rose*, p. 118.

degree individual and personal. For in his telling of the older tales beautiful meanings creep in, glimmering behind the words and actions of his heroes like a flame shining through a curtain ; and there is little difference between these heroes and the brotherhood of the Alchemical Rose, or Owen Aherne of *The Tables of the Law*, a little book which may be considered in conjunction with *The Secret Rose*. They are consumed, most of them, by a devouring spiritual fever, and spend their lives in a restless search for a knowledge that has been forbidden to man, for impossible experiences, or ineffable loves, that hurry them to the abyss, to death, to evil, to the outer darkness of horror. And none of them finds peace. Even he who renounces the strange unholy rites of the temple of the Alchemical Rose, and turns to fasting and to prayer, still hears the voices of the lawless demons in his ears ; and, while he clasps the rosary to his breast, their fatal beauty floats before his eyes, colouring his dreams, and filling his days and nights with the terror of insecurity. Yet in these perishing lives we seem to see Mr. Yeats's own ideal reflected, though it may be in a dark mirror, and are confronted by a sort of paradox. For the very doctrines he preaches, not here only but in nearly all his work, seem in

his stories to lead inevitably to disaster. Or is it only to the breaking of the body? Can they, in the end, cry with Cleopatra, "I am fire and air; my other elements I give to baser life"?[1] How far it is all but a form of imaginative beauty, but a material for art to work upon, I think it would be impossible for the poet himself to tell us, though we may try to find a solution of this question when we come to deal with his philosophy.

Not one of these stories is without beauty, whether it be the sombre, lyrical beauty of *Costello the Proud*, or the glittering, jewelled beauty of *Rosa Alchemica*, or the softer, sunlit beauty of *The Heart of the Spring*. It is difficult to indicate the particular quality which gives them at once their originality and their charm without somewhat lengthy quotation; but it seems to me to arise from a metaphysical subtlety of thought, in conjunction with an intensely vivid pictorial presentation. The actual scene is always evoked with a clearness as of something conjured up before our physical vision. The detail is never submerged in the general, but on the other hand it is never there for its own sake, and is used with the utmost economy, each stroke being put in for a definite purpose, and by the hand of an

[1] *Antony and Cleopatra*, V, ii, 288–9.

artist who can make sacrifices that we sometimes almost regret. In *The Heart of the Spring*, one of the earliest of the tales, the whole thing is brought before us in a series of pictures of extraordinary brilliance and delicacy. It is the story of an old man who after a long life of arduous study has at last discovered the secret of eternal youth. But this prize can only be captured at a particular moment of the year, and when the tale opens that moment is still a few hours distant. We see him first in the garden before the ruined monastery, giving his final instructions to "a russet-faced boy of seventeen years," his servant, who sits by his side "watching the swallows dipping for flies in the still water" of Lough Gill. Then follows the picture of the boy cutting the green boughs of the hazels, piling them about the door and windows, and strewing the floor with green rushes, and covering all with "the roses and the lilies of the monks." Lastly, when the boy comes in the morning, expecting to find his master quite young again and ready to start on his journey, we have the picture of the dead old man clasping the flowers to his breast. The boy "looked at the threadbare blue velvet, and he saw it was covered with the pollen of the flowers, and while he was looking at it a thrush,

who had alighted among the boughs that were piled against the window, began to sing."

Here what was aimed at was something which begins and ends in sheer beauty. Never for a moment are the greenness of the boughs, the scent of the roses, the song of birds, the quickening life of spring, allowed to pass from our consciousness; and the words that are spoken, the thoughts that flicker in the old man's mind, all tend to accentuate this charm of youth and life. The spring sunlight, the garden, the green growing world, the youth of the boy, stand out all the more vividly for the contrast procured by the ruined monastery, the worn gentle old man in his cloak of threadbare blue velvet. It is all deliberate, the result of a sure art, and brings with it the satisfaction of a perfectly achieved thing.

We miss from the new editions of *The Secret Rose*, *The Binding of the Hair*, which was a slight enough tale doubtless, though eminently characteristic, and no slighter than two or three of the stories that have been kept; and we miss that little masterpiece, *The Rose of Shadow*, artistically the most perfect story Mr. Yeats has written. The fact that he evidently does not intend to reprint it may perhaps excuse me for giving a brief outline of it here.

It is a winter night in the living-room of a poor cottage by the sea. Four people are assembled there, the father and mother, the brother and sister, and as the storm rages outside one memory beats down heavily upon all. On this night last year the girl's lover, an evil-living man, was murdered and hidden away by her brother, to avert what seemed to him a still greater disaster. But though her body has been saved, a sudden and unsuspected danger looms before three of the watchers now, as they hear the girl murmur strange words that had never passed her lips till to-night, and watch her rapt face as she listens to the howling wind. The mother pleads with her; the father orders her to be silent, and at last, in his anger and fear, rises and strikes her on the mouth. But she pays no heed to their words or to the blow, and a sense of growing horror creeps into their hearts with the sense of some dim dark power that is lurking in the storm and in the night, and is drawing very near. Still they struggle with her, but their words seem only to fan to a flame of terrible joy the spirit that is lost to all things now save the passion against which they are powerless, the passion they had thought dead, but which they at last feel to be dragging the whole house into the net of

doom. And presently rising to her feet, in a kind of rapture the girl begins to sing, in a low clear voice, that ecstatic love song which you will find in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, where it is called *The Heart of the Woman.*

While she had been singing, an intense drowsiness had crept into the room, as though the gates of Death had moved upon their hinges. The old woman had leaned forward upon the table, for she had suddenly understood that her hour had come. The young man had fixed his eyes fiercely on the face of the girl, and the light died out of them. The old man had known nothing except that he was very cold and sleepy, until the cold came to his heart. At the end of the song the storm began again with redoubled tumult, and the roof shook. The lips of the girl were half-parted in expectation, and out of her eyes looked all the submission which had been in the heart of woman from the first day.

Suddenly the thatch at one end of the roof rolled up, and the rushing clouds and a single star flickered before her eyes for a moment, and then seemed to be lost in a formless mass of flame which roared but gave no heat, and had in the midst of it the shape of a man crouching on the storm. His heavy and brutal face and his partly naked limbs were scarred with many wounds, and his eyes were full of white fire under his knitted brows.

Writing like that can only spring from a deep emotion; the imagination that describes

is the imagination that has *seen*. And this impression of reality depends upon two or three touches which might indeed have had their origin in actual vision—the "formless mass of flame which roared but gave no heat"; the "white fire" in the eyes. Change the white to red, leave simply the flame without its qualifying description, and the whole thing loses at once its significance, ceases to exist. But it is just such things that one can rely upon Mr. Yeats to give us; and we know that he will stop there, once his effect has been attained; the superfluous word that brings everything crashing to the ground is never added.

The three stories, *Rosa Alchemica*, *The Tables of the Law*, *The Adoration of the Magi*, form a little group separable from the rest of the tales, and are written directly under the influence of the magical tradition, with all its pomp and ritual. They mark, in that direction, a culminating point in Mr. Yeats's work, beyond which he cannot go without sacrificing his art to something in which art can only find a secondary place. The first of them, at least, is more deliberately ornamented, more loaded with jewels, than any other of his writings save, perhaps, *The Shadowy Waters*. Read simply as a tale of the supernatural, it is one

of the most convincing ever written: but to Mr. Yeats it is certainly much more than that. The thoughts and labours of that strange brotherhood of the Order of the Alchemical Rose must at this time to a large extent have been his own thoughts and labours. The three or four years separating *The Celtic Twilight* from these curious studies in the occult, were years of remarkable development. In them he came to that wonderful middle period when his work has a strangeness and a splendour that no other modern work possesses. Mr. George Moore gives a picture of him as he was at this time: "Stroking his thin yellow hands slowly, he looked into the midnight fire . . . and I listened to him telling of a volume of folklore collected by him in Sligo . . . and he continued to drone out his little tales in his own incomparable fashion, muttering after each one of them, like an oracle that has spent itself—'a beautiful story, a beautiful story!' When he had muttered these words his mind seemed to fade away, and I could not but think that he was tired and would be happier tucked up in bed."[1] We hear now for the first time of the influence of one Macgregor Mathers, the head of the 'Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,' learned

[1] *Ave*, p. 56.

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in all esoteric wisdom. Mr. Yeats belonged to this 'Order of the Golden Door,' and the McPherson of whom Mr. Moore writes in *Ave* is perhaps intended for Macgregor Mathers, though reticence in the matter of proper names, as in other things, is certainly not the outstanding quality of that remarkable work.

Rising from the low stool in the chimney-corner, he, (Yeats), led me to a long box packed with manuscripts, and among these I discovered on looking closer several packs of cards. As it could not be that Yeats was a clandestine bridge-player, I inquired the use the cards were put to, and learned that they were specially designed for the casting of horoscopes. He spoke of his uncle, a celebrated occultist whose predictions were always fulfilled, and related some of his own successes. All the same, he had been born under Aquarius, and the calculations of the movements of the stars in that constellation were so elaborate that he had abandoned the task for the moment, and was now seeking the influence of the Pleiades. He showed me some triangles drawn on plain sheets of cardboard, into which I was to look while thinking of some primary colour—red, or blue, or green. His instructions were followed by me—why not?—but nothing came of the experiment. . . .[1]

In various connections all through his later writings we find Mr. Yeats referring to the doctrines and practices of magic. The three

[1] *Ave*, p. 67.

stories I have mentioned could not have been written without a considerable knowledge of a subject which may primarily have attracted him from a certain picturesqueness in it; and one must admit that it is only in its picturesque aspect, accompanied by the pomp and colour of an elaborate ritual, that it ever appears in his writings. The alchemical mystery has for him a symbolical meaning, just as it had for the old alchemists, Flamel, Lully, Paracelsus. Alchemy is "the gradual distillation of the contents of the soul, until they are ready to put off the mortal and put on the immortal,"[1] seeking "a mystical union with the multitude who govern this world and time."[2] This hankering after the occult, this desire for supernatural knowledge, supernatural experience, is marvellously persistent in the human mind. To the artist, so far as his art is concerned, it may easily prove fatal, lead him to the sterile absurdities of a Péladan, if not to the rhetorical jargon of an Eliphas Lévi. For though from the artistic treatment of the supernatural there may emerge a beauty quite different in kind from any other beauty, yet to the artist who passes beyond the fringe of initiation in practical magic, it must become

[1] *The Secret Rose*, p. 249.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 232.

a snare, a voice luring him farther and farther from life, frequently, too, going hand in hand with a deep-rooted materialism. If one hover on the fringe of the secret world one may hear echoes coming from it of an exquisite loveliness. Such echoes indeed murmur through much of the poetry and prose of Mr. Walter de la Mare, giving them a delicate and fantastic beauty, that mingles with the inexpressible charm of a genius as lovable and human as any that ever existed. But that, after all, is but natural magic. Mr. Yeats has gone much farther. In such things as *Rosa Alchemica*, all that is merely human has ceased to count, just as it ceased to count with Villiers. This, then, is the penalty of an absorption in the occult, which, it cannot be too often repeated, is not at all necessarily the spiritual. One loses interest in the natural, the normal; and what one has lost interest in one cannot write about. That it was more or less for the sake of his art that Mr. Yeats ceased to dabble in magic—though he has never ceased to experiment in spiritualism—may perhaps be gathered from the preface to *Where There is Nothing*:—

. . . when I had finished *The Secret Rose*, and was half way through *The Wind Among the Reeds*, a wise woman in her trance told me that my inspiration was

from the moon, and that I should always live close to water, for my work was getting too full of those little jewelled thoughts that come from the sun and have no nation. I had no need to turn to my books of astrology to know that the common people are under the moon, or to Porphyry to remember the image-making power of the waters.[1]

From this time on, and with his return to his own country, a new interest took up a larger and larger share of his thoughts and of his labours, the founding of a national drama in Ireland, and the building up of an audience which would make such a drama possible. It was a colossal task, for he had everything, or very nearly everything, against him; yet he has accomplished it, though it has developed along lines which are not those he himself originally laid down.

[1] *Where There is Nothing*, p. viii.

V

PLAYS FOR AN IRISH THEATRE

I

It is not my purpose in this book to give an elaborate history of what has been called the Celtic Renaissance. As Mr. George Moore has said, "All the Irish movement rose out of Yeats and returns to Yeats."[1] No other writer of first-rate importance has been associated with it. For great art is essentially lonely. It is not inspired by the chatter of schools and movements, and when it is connected with a school at all, it is usually because it has founded one. The work that counts is more likely to be conceived in a rectory on the Yorkshire moors, or in a cottage in the lake country, than in the self-conscious atmosphere of literary circles. Movements are distinctly useful to the writers who belong to them, and whose very existence sometimes depends upon the fact that they *do* belong to them; but too often their main function is to turn out, while

[1] *Vale*, p. 206.

the demand lasts, innumerable copies of some beautiful original, and it must be remembered that every imitation detracts from that original, tends to make what was rare common.

The dramatic movement has produced Synge, who was an artist, but certainly not a great writer. His sympathies lay too exclusively with what is exceptional for that. "In a spirit of any fineness human things inspire but two feelings: admiration or pity"—*Les choses humaines n'inspirent que deux sentiments aux esprits bien faits: l'admiration ou la pitié*[1]—and it is partly, but only partly, because these sentiments seem to me to be almost completely absent from that intense, hard, narrow, bizarre talent—and I say this quite remembering Riders to the Sea—that I think we do it an injustice in claiming for it more than it can carry.

Yet despite the fact that it has been exhaustively chronicled elsewhere, one cannot pass over in silence Mr. Yeats's share in the founding of the Abbey Theatre. Too many years of his life have been devoted to it for that. Mr. Yeats *made* the Abbey, and (though it is now a folk-theatre much more than that ideal theatre we used to hear about, where poetic drama was to be the chief attraction) in

[1] Anatole France, *La Vie Litteraire*, vol. i, p. 237.

doing so he conferred a gift of immense and national importance upon Ireland. Lady Gregory in her book, Our Irish Theatre, has described how on a certain wet afternoon in 1898 she and Mr. Yeats discussed the possibility of giving performances of Mr. Martyn's Heather Field and *The Countess Cathleen*, she herself offering the first guarantee of £25. The scheme was taken up by others, and on the 8th of May, 1899, in the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin, the Irish National Theatre came into existence. The two plays mentioned were there acted by English actors, under the general management of Miss Florence Farr; four performances of *The Countess Cathleen* being given, and three of The Heather Field. For the first performance Lionel Johnson, who was no more an Irishman than the King of Siam, although he is always included in the Irish movement, wrote this delightful prologue :—

> The May fire once on every dreaming hill
> All the fair land with burning bloom would fill;
> All the fair land, at visionary night,
> Gave loving glory to the Lord of Light.
> Have we no leaping flames of Beltaine praise
> To kindle in the joyous ancient ways;
> No fire of song, of vision, of white dream,
> Fit for the Master of the Heavenly Gleam;
> For him who first made Ireland move in chime,
> Musical from the misty dawn of time?

Ah, yes ; for sacrifice this night we bring
The passion of a lost soul's triumphing ;
All rich with faery airs that, wandering long
Uncaught, here gather into Irish song ;
Sweet as the old remembering winds that wail,
From hill to hill of gracious Inisfail ;
Sad as the unforgetting winds that pass,
Over her children in her holy grass
At home, and sleeping well upon her breast,
Where snowy Deirdre and her sorrows rest.

Another tale we tell you : how a man,
Filled with high dreams, his race of longing ran,
Haunted by fair and infinite desire ;
Whose life was music, yet a wounding fire.
Stern is the story : welcome it no less,
Aching and lofty in its loveliness.
Come, then, and keep with us an Irish feast,
Wherein the Lord of Light and Song is priest ;
Now, at this opening of the gentle May,
Watch warring passions at their storm and play ;
Wrought with the flaming ecstasy of art,
Sprung from the dreaming of an Irish heart.

Surely no fairer beginning could be imagined than that provided by these charming verses. Mr. George Moore, who had looked after the rehearsals in London, has given his impression of one of those memorable performances—either the second or the third.

Yeats was there, listening reverentially to the sound of his verses. He went away as soon as the curtain fell, returning just before the beginning of the next

act, his cloak and his locks adding, I thought, to the melancholy of the entertainment. His intentness interested me so much that I did not venture to interrupt it. His play seemed to be going quite well, but in the middle of the last act some people came on the stage whom I did not recognize as part of the cast, and immediately the hall was filled with a strange wailing, intermingled with screams; and now, being really frightened, I scrambled over the benches, and laying my hand upon Yeats's shoulder begged him to tell me what was happening. He answered, "The *caoine*—the *caoine*." A true *caoine* and its singers had been brought from Galway.

"From Galway!" I exclaimed. "You miserable man! and you promised me that the play should be performed as it was rehearsed. . . ."

Immediately afterwards the gallery began to howl, and that night the Antient Concert Rooms reminded me of a cats' and dogs' home suddenly merged into one. "You see what you have brought upon yourself, miserable man!" I cried in Yeats's ear.

"It is not," he said, "the *caoine* they are howling at, but the play itself. . . . I would hear the Countess's last speech—I'll tell you after."

"A man must love his play very much," I thought, "to be able to listen to it in such distressing circumstances." He did not seem to hear the cat-calls. . . .[1]

The disturbance, the cat-calls, etc., were a protest against religious heresy. If ever a play were innocent and unprovocative, *The*

[1] *Ave*, pp. 99–100.

Countess Cathleen might have been supposed to be that play, but this was far from the opinion of one section of the audience assembled to watch it. That an Irishwoman should sell her soul to the devil was to them a deliberate slander upon the whole Irish nation. There were pamphlets and newspaper articles; the Catholicism of Ireland had been insulted, and the insult was not going to be suffered in silence. Even a fairly determined optimist might have been discouraged by this reception, which, though it seems comic enough to-day, was at the time distinctly serious. What freedom, what hope, could there be for art in a community so constituted? Religion or politics!—it was inconceivable that a man should write anything that had not either an open or a hidden bearing upon one or other of these questions. But Mr. Yeats was not discouraged. For three years the Irish Theatre played in Dublin for one week each year, though still with actors brought over from London.

It was now that the Fays, who had been producing little pieces on their own account, and to whom much of the subsequent success of the theatre was due, came in, and a company of Irish actors was formed under their management, producing "A. E.'s" Deirdre and

Mr. Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan.* The fact that William Fay happened to be an actor of genius cannot be overlooked in any estimation of the varying fortunes of the Irish Theatre. I myself had not the pleasure of seeing him act until the theatre was well established, thanks to Miss Horniman's generosity, but he was then, within his limits, one of the most finished artists I have ever seen upon the stage. He never accentuated a point, never made a concession to the less intelligent among his audience, and the grimness and bitterness of certain of his readings—those of Martin Dhoul and of Christy Mahon, for example, in The Well of the Saints and in The Playboy—had an insight, an intensity, that produced a positively electrical effect upon the spectator.

In 1904 Miss Horniman presented the Irish players with a theatre of their own in Abbey Street. "We may look upon ourselves as the first endowed theatre in any English-speaking country," Mr. Yeats writes in *Samhain,* 1904, "the English-speaking countries and Venezuela being the only countries which have never endowed their theatres." Venezuela is charming, and so characteristic that, though it may be against the interests of the drama, one is glad Mr. Yeats was able to bring it in. Miss Horni-

man's support was promised for six years, but the players and playwrights still gave their services for nothing. The building up of an audience was hard work, and more than once a section of it was alienated by the production of certain plays, notably one or two of Synge's. Yet the production of The Playboy in 1907, though it excited more opposition than anything had yet excited, helped the theatre considerably by giving it an enormous advertisement. When Miss Horniman's support was withdrawn, the company was sufficiently prosperous to pay its own way, and since then each year has brought it an increased success.

That the labour in the beginning was no light one may be gathered from Lady Gregory's own words:

> Often near midnight, after the theatre had closed, I have gone round to the newspaper offices, asking as a favour that notices might be put in, for we could pay for but few advertisements and it was not always thought worth while to send a critic to our plays. Often I have gone out by the stage door when the curtain was up, and come round into the auditorium by the front hall, hoping that in the dimness I might pass for a new arrival and so encourage the few scattered people in the stalls.[1]

[1] *Our Irish Theatre*, pp. 46–7.

In the original statement of the theatre the hand of Mr. Yeats may be traced. The rhythmic flow of these sentences is unmistakable.

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence, will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed.

It is Mr. Yeats, too, who gives the "Advice to Playwrights who are sending Plays to the Abbey, Dublin" . . . "We do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays written mainly to serve some obvious moral purpose; for art seldom concerns itself with those interests or opinions that can be defended by argument, but with realities of emotion and character that become self-evident when made vivid to the imagination."

It is easy to see, on looking over old Samhains and Beltaines, that the theatre Mr.

Yeats dreamed of was a theatre primarily for the production of poetic drama—tragedy such as *Deirdre* or *The Countess Cathleen*, romantic plays such as *The King's Threshold*, mystical plays such as *The Shadowy Waters* or *The Hour Glass*—and it is equally easy to see, on turning over a list of the plays that have actually been produced, that it is not such things as these that have made the Abbey a financial success. He has always over-estimated the æsthetic possibilities of the theatre. He wants poetry, and goes to the last place in the world where poetry is ever likely to be found except by accident. Those who care most for poetry are as a rule exactly those who will avoid going to see Twelfth Night or *The Land of Heart's Desire* acted. If one delights really in these things, the lines murmur themselves to a music that will be fatally distorted by dramatic inflections, dramatic action; and the closer the player brings them to the actual prose speech of life—which is what all players try to do—the more will the music suffer. Moreover, the figures in a piece like Twelfth Night visualize themselves in our imagination, like figures in a dream; and the beauty of Viola will never be the beauty of the leading lady; and the scenery that is evoked in the "mind's eye" will be very different

from the poor painted wood and canvas, be it never so decorative—those trees that no wind ever stirred, that sky of cloth, that waveless, soundless sea. With prose drama it is different. There is every chance that a prose play will gain much more than it loses in production. Anyone who saw William Fay in Synge's plays must have felt how enormously they were helped by that actor's interpretation of the leading characters, which gave the note, as it were, to the whole performance: while, to descend the scale a little, in such a play as The Rising of the Moon, it was *his* talent, not the author's, that was the outstanding feature. But in poetic drama the atmosphere is more subtle and elusive, and somehow it rarely manages to get across the footlights. Subtlety is a positive drawback in an art where only broad effects and emphasized emotions appear to have value. It is as if the colour of everything must be heightened, just as the colour in the actors' faces is heightened, to avoid insipidity or obscurity. And the same thing applies when, though written in prose, the drama is substantially poetic, as in Maeterlinck. It is The Blue Bird, with its spectacular effects and obvious allegory sweetened by the sentimental appeal of the nursery, not La Mort de Tintagiles, that fills

a theatre night after night. It is useless to talk about ideal audiences; they do not exist; and if bad plays had been written for him I have not the slightest doubt that the average Athenian would have preferred them to the Oedipus Tyrannus or the Antigone. Euripides in fifty years won only four first prizes. Twice a year at Athens dramatic competitions were held. "We read," says Professor Butcher, "of some strange results in these competitions; the defeat, for instance, of the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles (the play which Aristotle regarded as the model of dramatic construction) by an obscure poet Philocles. Still more unaccountable in the next century was the poor success that attended Menander, who exhibited 108 comedies, but was only eight times victorious."[1] And glancing at Professor Gilbert Murray's criticism of Euripides we find, "The Medea is, perhaps, the most artistically flawless of his plays; though, oddly enough, it was a failure when first acted."[2] What Plato thought of the judgment and taste of the average Athenian playgoer, we have only to turn to the *Laws*[3] to see.

Of the Irish peasantry, however, Mr. Yeats

[1] *Harvard Lectures on Greek Subjects*, p. 174.
[2] *Ancient Greek Literature*, p. 262.
[3] *Laws* (trans. Jowett, vol. v, pp. 37, 82–3).

imagines, "one could still, if one had the genius, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece."[1] One might, and they might even tolerate them, just as a cat will tolerate porridge if she hasn't smelled fish. Poetry appeals to the poetic temperament, and the poetic temperament is not peculiar to any one class, so that the idealization of the peasant and the condemnation of the aristocrat are alike idle. Most good work, whether in poetry or anything else, has come from the middle class, and that is simply because the middle class is the largest which has received an education.

"Our plays will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal."[2] Well, that prophecy has not come true; but the reforms Mr. Yeats has sought to bring into the theatre, and has written about so frequently, have little bearing save upon such "remote, spiritual, and ideal" plays. In all he says we find a reaction from that elaborately mimetic method of presentation dear to what he has called "the theatre of commerce"; and a return to simplicity and convention. So he pleads for "grave and decorative gestures," for "grave and decorative scenery that will be forgotten the moment

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 337.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 259.

an actor has said 'It is dawn,' or 'It is raining,' or 'The wind is shaking the trees.'"[1] This new acting will, so far as I understand it, have more in common with a kind of impassioned ritual, religious in its solemnity, its freedom from restlessness, than with the acting we are accustomed to. But more than anything else it is upon the speaking of verse that Mr. Yeats dwells. If one can get beautiful musical speech one has got the main thing, in comparison with which everything else is of very minor importance. The ideal theatre is a place to which one comes to listen to poetry, for poetry on the printed page is but a pale reflection of poetry singing in the human voice: is no more than the cold, printed musical score that awakens into a rich and rapturous life under the bow of the musician.

"There is no poem so great that a fine speaker cannot make it greater or that a bad ear cannot make it nothing."[2] That is true, and just there, it seems to me, we have the influence that originally drew Mr. Yeats to dramatic writing. But since then he has come to like it for other reasons, forgetting, or indifferent to, the fact that with the coming of the actor there comes the tyranny of his

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 265.
[2] *Samhain*, December, 1906.

particular talent, of his personality. Very rarely indeed will he be content to make "grave, decorative gestures" before a "decorative curtain," while he speaks beautiful verses. The actor, to put it briefly, wants to act. The admiration he works for is an admiration that shall be centred upon himself much more than upon his poet, who is but a means to this end. And it is curious to note how in nearly every instance the alterations Mr. Yeats has made in his early plays have been concessions to this no doubt very natural desire, so that what possibly strengthens his work from the actor's point of view, almost invariably weakens it as poetry. In the second version of *The Shadowy Waters*, for example, the idea on which the play is founded remains exactly as it was; the only difference being that everywhere we find a sacrifice of atmosphere and poetry. It is simply the same idea translated into a less perfect form, that it may appeal to a less intelligent audience.

The plays Mr. Yeats has written since he has had a theatre under his personal control are eight in number: *Cathleen ni Houlihan, The Pot of Broth, The Hour Glass, Where There is Nothing* (later rewritten by Lady Gregory as The Unicorn from the Stars), *The King's Threshold, On Baile's Strand, Deirdre, The*

Golden Helmet (later, *The Green Helmet*); all, with the exception of *Where There is Nothing*, plays in one act, though of very varying degrees of importance.

II

We may pass over the prose plays here, leaving them for a later chapter that will deal with the problem of collaboration. The first of the poetic plays, the first to be produced at all events, is *The King's Threshold* (1903).

Seanchan, a poet, has, through the influence of "Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law," been removed from his seat at the King's table to one lower down. He will not submit to this indignity, and, going out to the steps before the palace, lies there, refusing all food till he shall be restored to his former place. "He has chosen death," the King cries,

> Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring
> Disgrace upon me; for there is a custom,
> An old and foolish custom, that if a man
> Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve
> Upon another's threshold till he die,
> The common people, for all time to come,
> Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
> Even though it be the King's.

But in the end it is the King who yields, crowning Seanchan with his own crown, before

the whole court. The poet, rising from the steps, returns it to him :

> It is but right the hands that made the crown
> In the old time should give it where they please.

This is the play, and its action, which might have been modelled upon that of the Book of Job, consists merely in the various persuasions by which one person after another—and amongst them the girl Seanchan loves—seeks to alter the poet's purpose. There are of course beautiful things said, but one feels from beginning to end that the subject is not worthy of Mr. Yeats's genius. This clamouring of a poet to sit at a King's table, though it is to be construed as a plea for the dignity of art, is not a thing to move one very profoundly. Mr. Yeats gives his finest poetry to the cripples, a poetry full of arresting and vivid imagery, fresh and sharp with a curious pungency :

> Nothing at all, he wanted his own sort.
> What's honey to a cat, corn to a dog,
> Or a green apple to a ghost in a churchyard ?

Such lines as these detach themselves from the main body of the play, which leaves us as a whole dissatisfied. It shows how little can be done by mere style alone, though nothing

can be done without it. The poetry in *The King's Threshold* is too often rhetorical and very little more, dropping to the level of the subject as poetry inevitably does, so that when, as in *The Green Helmet*, this is entirely trivial, even the verse becomes valueless, merely ingenious, fanciful in the lightest sense, and without any true poetic quality at all.

On Baile's Strand also belongs to 1903. I give the dates, though they are of little value, as I am writing of all these plays in their final form, which, needless to add, has been reached by the way of many revisions. *Baile's Strand* is in every respect a great advance on *The King's Threshold*. Its subject is the old story of Cucuhlain's slaying of his own son, of his madness, of his war against the breaking waves, and of his death. Mr. Yeats had long ago made a poem of this, *The Death of Cucuhlain*,[1] and there is nothing in the play, I think, that has the pathos of that line in the poem spoken by Cucuhlain when he learns who it is that he has fought against and struck down:

> I put you from your pain. I can no more . . .

nothing that has the brief tragic note of the last four lines describing Cucuhlain's death.

[1] *Poems.*

Yet *Baile's Strand* is admirably constructed, and it has beauty—a somewhat cold and impersonal beauty. Technically, indeed, I am inclined to believe it the most perfect of the poetic dramas, except *The Hour Glass*. After this it may sound rather queer praise to add that its charm seems to me to depend largely on the prose portions, the parts of the blind man and the fool. These are admirably right, and in their harmony and contrast with the verse carry one back to such felicitous blendings of verse and prose as one finds in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Mr. Yeats never wrote better dialogue than he has written in the prose dialogue of this play. It is simple, and yet has a note of wildness and strangeness in its irony that lifts it straight into the world of poetry, though of a poetry quite different in quality from the heroic poetry of the verse. If he had produced nothing else than this subtle mosaic of prose and verse he would have proved himself a fine artist, though not a great dramatist. For the two blended elements cast each a light upon the other; and the tragedy is heightened by a sort of ironic commentary on all human life, where great heroes and the splendour of their deeds serve, in the end, the thievish purpose of a blind man and a fool.

BLIND MAN. Come here, Fool!

FOOL. The waves have mastered him.

BLIND MAN. Come here, I say.

FOOL. What is it?

BLIND MAN. There will be nobody in the houses. Come this way; come quickly! The ovens will be full. We will put our hands into the ovens.

Deirdre (1906) is Mr. Yeats's only love drama, for though he writes of love in his other plays, that passion is never, as it is here, a purely human passion, but coloured by remoter influences, and not really at the heart of the story. In *Deirdre* he deals with only the last episode in the life of that ill-fated heroine. It is a story of treachery, of a broken promise that ends in death. Deirdre has fled with her young lover Naisi from Conchubar, the king, who would have married her. After a time she learns that if she and her lover return they will be forgiven, for the King's anger is passed. So they come back, but it is to a trap. One way of safety remains, that she will renounce Naisi and give herself to Conchubar. She would, in the end, make this sacrifice, but Naisi himself refuses it. He is murdered by the King's men, and Deirdre, seeming to yield to the old man's desire, is allowed by him to go behind the

curtain where the body lies, and bid farewell to it.

> For I will see him
> All blood-bedabbled and his beauty gone.

Then upon the body of her lover she stabs herself; and while the King stands waiting he hears the musicians sing:

> They are gone, they are gone. The proud may lie by the proud,
> Though we were bidden to sing, cry nothing loud.
> They are gone, they are gone. Whispering were enough.
> Into the secret wilderness of their love.
> A high, grey cairn. What more is to be said?
> Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed.

The play has in places great beauty. There are splendid things in it, as those lines spoken by Deirdre to her lover when they realize that they are trapped and that the end must be death to one or both.

> Do you remember that first night in the woods
> We lay all night on leaves, and looking up,
> When the first grey of the dawn awoke the birds,
> Saw leaves above us? You thought that I still slept,
> And bending down to kiss me on the eyes,
> Found they were open. Bend and kiss me now. . . .

Nothing perhaps in the whole play is so dramatically perfect, so quick with emotion, as those words, "Bend and kiss me now." The verse all through is more musical and

coloured than the verse of *Baile's Strand* or *The King's Threshold.* Frequently one hears in it a return almost to the richness of the earlier lyrical manner, and scattered through the play are one or two faultless songs. No one can cavil here at the subject, which is eminently suitable for dramatic treatment. The very setting of the piece, that strange little guest-house in the woods, through whose windows the branches of the trees show darkly against a dimming sky, suggests tragedy; and the stage directions intensify this suggestion, the dark-faced men who pass the window in silence and disappear. Perhaps it is because we know the story before it is told, just as we know the old Greek stories, or the story of Cleopatra, that every allusion wakens a memory, calls up an image. Certain it is that, from the beginning until the entry of Deirdre and Naisi, everything seems to wait and watch and listen as for some dreaded footfall; and we know that if they once cross the threshold it will be to meet with some dire calamity, in spite of the reassuring words of Fergus.

Why, then, is the play not the masterpiece which up to this point we are sure it is going to be? Unfortunately just here comes in the great blemish that spoils it, and that struck

me even more as I re-read it for the purposes of this chapter than when I had read it before. It is one of those fundamental blots that spring not from any deficiency of execution, but from something deeper, from the conception itself. The whole scene that leads up to the chess-playing, the passages, again, where Deirdre and Naisi urge the musicians to make a poem of their story, are wrongly felt. It would be truer, maybe, to say that they are not felt at all. The result is beautiful pictorial writing, but nothing more; and we get the quite fatal impression (fatal so far as our sympathy, as our being moved, is concerned) that the lovers are posing for posterity, are tasting in anticipation the beauty of their own story, and its sadness. This is wrong, all wrong, far wronger than any of the defects Mr. Yeats has removed from his other plays. As Biron says in Love's Labour's Lost, "Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief."[1] Moreover, psychologically, it is impossible. The greatest vanity in the world would sink away at such a moment, a moment when murderers are lurking outside the house, waiting to do the bidding of cruelty and lust. It is no time for literary preoccupations. It would not matter so much were there not

[1] *Love's Labour's Lost*, v, 2, 743.

passages in the play, like those words of Deirdre's I have quoted, which are more passionate and human than Mr. Yeats as a rule gets into his dramatic work, and which suffer from this breath of unreality that is blown upon them, this trail of the picturesque, with its grave posturing and rhythmic passionless grief that is but the outer ritual of grief, which is drawn all over lines like these :—

> Oh, singing women, set it down in a book
> That love is all we need, even though it is
> But the last drops we gather up like this ;
> And though the drops are all we have known of life,
> For we have been most friendless—praise us for it
> And praise the double sunset, for naught's lacking,
> But a good end to the long, cloudy day.

"The double sunset!" It is thus that Deirdre alludes to her own and Naisi's murder. The phrase might have beauty in another connection, but here its falseness jars unpleasantly. And again :—

> Women, if I die,
> If Naisi die this night, how will you praise ?
> What words seek out ?

Were ever lines more unfortunate than these two lines ? Are they not in themselves enough to turn to ice the hottest sympathy ? It speaks volumes for other qualities the play possesses when we add that, despite such

things, which might well strike us as absolutely disastrous, from the finished drama there somehow *does* emerge a definite effect of beauty and tragedy. The thing is not quite saved, it is true; that would be impossible; but it is partially saved. And what comes to its rescue is just the fine rich density of its atmosphere, so charged with a sense of fate. The elaborate preparation for what is to come is admirable, and if the vital touch that would have set all vibrating with terror and love and a last passionate struggle against the closing nets of death had been given, what a triumphant confutation this play would have furnished to those who have denied Mr. Yeats's dramatic gift. As it is, that vital touch seems to have been missed unconsciously. It is not that it has failed; it is simply that it has never been tried for, in the preoccupation with I know not what attempt to create a frieze-like beauty; so that when all should have been most living the figures move and speak with something of the marmoreal calm of beings whose tragedy is already over, who have already passed the gates of death. The cry that we are expecting to tear the silence is stilled, and a sleepy murmur breaks in upon our ears, as of lovers speaking of some old sad story that has happened long ago, and it is

with a sort of amazement that we realize that it *is* of such a story they are speaking, as though with no other end than to shut out the lonely sound of the wind rocking the trees; and we picture them drawing closer to the comforting blaze of the fire.

The effort towards the mastery of dramatic writing apparent in all these later plays has resulted in a style that is at once less natural and less individual than Mr. Yeats's earlier poetic style. Again and again in reading them I am reminded of the Elizabethans, while very rarely have I the feeling of being in that strange, lovely world, which was Mr. Yeats's own world when he wrote *The Land of Heart's Desire.* No man of Mr. Yeats's intelligence could, of course, have laboured so assiduously as he has at drama without making progress in it; but the progress that I note is purely formal. It seems to me that what interests him, almost exclusively, is his technique—nowhere is there much trace of an interest in life itself. Now drama may be poetic, and it may be mystical, but it *must* have life. If you take a play like Hauptmann's Hannele, which is realistic in its method; or plays like Aglavaine et Sélysette, or Intérieur, or La Mort de Tintagiles, which are essentially poetic; you will find that their

common basis is a profound interest in, and sympathy with, humanity—not merely an interest in scene-pictures and dramatic construction. It is this that keeps them bound by a thousand delicate threads to reality, and prevents them from flying off into some beautiful icy region of intellectual abstractions. The pathos of Hannele, the tenderness and pity of Aglavaine, of La Mort de Tintagiles, have no counterpart in the *Plays for an Irish Theatre*. To begin with, I do not think Mr. Yeats *cares* enough for anything outside his art. With humanity in the rough, quite indifferent to art, rather stupid perhaps, simple and instinctive, he does not seem to have any sympathy at all. He has written contemptuously of

> the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.[1]

In *The King's Threshold* they become the "bishops, soldiers, and makers of the law." But it is the poet, the man of genius, who is the exception; the soldiers, lawyers, bankers, schoolmasters, clergymen, etc., who are the stuff of which humanity is composed, and precisely the stuff upon which the dramatist has to work. He must take human beings as

[1] *Poems*, 1899–1905, "Adam's Curse."

they are. That habit of mind which would dismiss whole sections of the community as uninteresting, if not positively beneath notice, is the worst possible equipment for the novelist or dramatist, no matter upon what plane he works. One cannot help concluding that the spectacle of life does not greatly move Mr. Yeats. There are certain manifestations of life that interest him—particularly when seen through the veil of artistic treatment—but life as a whole—no. In his lyrical work, largely subjective as it is, one is rarely conscious of this limitation; but in his dramatic work it leaps at once to the surface. We only understand what we have experienced. There is no passion a man may feel, no crime he may commit, which will not appear to us quite different in its significance if we ourselves have ever felt that passion, or felt tempted to commit that crime. It is maybe, indeed, only on such, sometimes very expensive, terms, that life reveals to us its really intimate secrets. Seldom in Mr. Yeats's dramas is there an indication of any direct contact with life. Writing, in the *Discoveries* of 1906, of Verlaine, he says, "While he lived I was interested in nothing but states of mind, lyrical moments, intellectual essences. I would not then have been as delighted as I am now by that guitar player.

. . . Without knowing it I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty."[1] The guitar player is a kind of symbol of his return to the world of human interests, and these plays are the first fruits of that too deliberate return, things essentially experimental, that strike one as not done with the full consent of the poet's spirit, as proceeding from the will, the intellect, but not from the heart, so that the principal emotion we feel behind them is the emotion of the enthusiastic craftsman.

This same temperamental peculiarity, I cannot but think, has had much to do with Mr. Yeats's theory of tragedy, in which he dismisses the creation of character as inessential. In the purely lyrical plays this did not matter: but in the later plays it does. Cucuhlain alone, in these later plays, stands to some extent upon his feet—the others, heroes and heroines alike, are little more than names, figures almost as interchangeable and unrecognizable as pawns upon a chessboard, so that it hardly matters from whose lips any particular speech comes.

To be quite unfair for a moment, think of that exquisitely moving scene in Richard Feverel, where Austin Wentworth brings Lucy for the first time to Richard's father; of that

[1] *Discoveries*, "The Tree of Life."

intensely tragic scene where Richard reads Clare's diary. How could we feel these things as we do feel them, if we did not know the people we are reading about? Of course even a long play in five acts gives nothing like an equal opportunity for getting such effects, which is precisely what makes the novel-form so much richer than the dramatic. Still less can we expect them in a one-act play. But the point is that Mr. Yeats's theory, which he explains in a preface to *Plays for an Irish Theatre*,[1] and in an essay in *The Cutting of an Agate*,[2] dismisses character, as I have said, as inessential. He denies its existence in tragedy proper, while admitting it in what he calls tragi-comedy, under which heading he classes all Shakespeare's tragedies. He mentions Corneille and Racine as writers of tragedy; but is the immense gulf that divides Rodogune from, say, Macbeth, or Coriolanus, or Antony and Cleopatra, really in any way to be bridged by saying that the former is more consistently tragic in quality? Is there any appreciable difference, other than its happy ending, between Le Cid, which Corneille himself called a tragi-comedy, and Rodogune? One hardly needs, I think, to contrast the mon-

[1] *Plays for an Irish Theatre*, pp. v *sqq.*
[2] *The Cutting of an Agate*, pp. 198 *sqq.*

strous Cléopâtre of this latter play with Lady Macbeth, to appreciate the advantage that lies with the dramatist who can create a human being.

Turning again to Shakespeare, Mr. Yeats urges that in the "great moments" of his drama, in the moments of supreme passion, character is forgotten. But can there, we might reply, really *be* such moments at all, if the persons who experience it are not there for us? Is it not principally by character that our feelings are moved, our sympathies awakened? It is so in life; how, then, can it be otherwise in art? Granting that the two genres exist—for we have always Racine—does the difference between them really spring from any deliberate choice that has been made by the writers of "tragedy"? Is it not rather the result of a lack of power in one particular direction? *Could* Racine have written as Shakespeare wrote—that is, *could* he have created Hamlet, or Coriolanus, or Brutus, or Richard II, or Lady Macbeth? Did not the Greeks, who worked under far stricter limitations than those imposed on any modern writer, try for as much character as they could get?

The fact is there, at any rate, that we hardly ever get from Mr. Yeats's plays a

pleasure that comes through our emotional sympathy. We never really care enough about Niasi or Deirdre to care what becomes of them. We are moved by the beauty of the imagery, the beauty of the verse, but that emotion of pity which such a story as theirs should arouse, is left untouched.

It is because *The Hour Glass*, from the nature of its subject, minimizes this weakness of Mr. Yeats's, that it is, to my mind, much the best of his later plays. A sense of all that I have been pleading for would not here have appreciably helped him, and he has every other quality, all the qualities, that is to say, which such a play demands.

The Hour Glass appeared in prose in 1903, but the final, poetic version was only printed in 1914. Mr. Yeats has immensely improved the play, weaving into the prose, itself re-written, some of his most exquisite verse, and removing what was its great weakness, the opening soliloquy of the Wise Man. The ending too is altered, for in the first version the Wise Man receives salvation as a gift from the Fool; in the new version he submits himself to the will of God. The little play is a Morality, but without the coldness and stiffness which characterizes the mediæval Moralities. Its emotion is veiled and restrained, the

Wise Man's fear of death and hell being put before us without any straining after realism. To the Fool, who, like all Mr. Yeats's fools, is based on a convention partly his own and partly Shakespearean, he has, as usual, given some of the most beautiful speeches in the play. The omission of one line only from the older play is, I think, to be regretted, and I hope it will be put back again; for in its simplicity it came with a kind of strange, awful solemnity, which showed unmistakably that the words used were the right words. It is where the Wise Man, dazed and doubtful before the apparition of the Angel, falters out his question, "What are you? Who are you?" And the answer comes, "I am the Angel of the Most High God." It is already a verse line, and the new line, "I am the crafty one that you have called," is far from an improvement.

The play is this. A Wise Man, in the pride of intellect, has put from him all faith in the unseen, the

> foolish stories they have told of the ghosts
> That fumbled with the clothes upon the bed,
> Or creaked and shuffled in the corridor,
> Or else, if they were pious bred,
> Of angels from the skies,
> That coming through the door,
> Or, it maybe, standing there,
> Would solidly outstare
> The steadfast eyes with their unnatural eyes . . .

and he has so well taught his pupils that all the people living in that place where his school is, are given over to materialism and to the cares and pleasures of the body. Only Teigue, the fool, still believes in things that are not the things of sense, and it is he who sees the angel coming to the Wise Man with a message that he

> will die when the last grain of sand
> Has fallen through this glass.

He must die because

> no soul has passed
> The heavenly threshold since you have opened school,
> But grass grows there, and rust upon the hinge ;
> And they are lonely that must keep the watch.

He will die, and he will go to hell, which "is the place of those who have denied." Only if he can find one soul that still believes in its immortality may he, through purgatory, come at last to heaven. Then the Wise Man, thinking that the unbelief of his pupils is but skin-deep, cries in relief,

> Before you have begun to climb the sky
> I shall have found that soul.

But his teaching has taken deeper root than he imagined. His pupils, in high spirits, come in with the Fool, whom they are mocking, dancing about him and singing :

I'll find your wits again,
Come, for I saw them roll,
To where old badger mumbles
In the black hole.

No, but an angel stole them
The night that you were born,
And now they are but a rag
On the moon's horn.

The Wise Man eagerly, and at last despairingly, questions them, seeking beneath their young, self-conscious learning, the old faith of their childhood.

What do you think of when alone at night ?
Do not the things your mothers spoke about
Before they took the candle from the bedside,
Rush up into the mind and master it,
Till you believe in them against your will ?

Vain hope ! for they see in his eagerness only an eagerness for argument, and in the end, half frightened by his strange manner, they run out, leaving him alone. When he turns to his wife, his children, it is the same ; and the Fool, who alone knows, and who before had spoken of his knowledge freely enough, now refuses to speak save to reiterate his whine of " Give me a penny. Give me a penny," which sounds like a refrain throughout the play. It is only after a last appeal to Teigue that he

realizes that he will get no help from anyone, and with this his dignity returns :

> The last hope is gone,
> And now that it's too late I see it all,
> We perish into God and sink away
> Into reality—the rest's a dream.

The Fool comes back. "There was one there —there by the threshold stone, waiting there and said, 'Go in, Teigue, and tell him everything that he asks you. He will give you a penny if you tell him.'"

> Be silent. May God's will prevail on the instant,
> Although His will be my eternal pain.
> I have no question :
> It is enough, I know what fixed the station
> Of star and cloud.

The Angel enters ; the sand has run out ; and the curtain goes down on the Fool alone and singing over the body :

> I hear the wind a-blow,
> I hear the grass a-grow,
> And all that I know, I know.
> But I will not speak, I will run away.

The beauty of the little drama is delicate and exquisite. As it now stands it is certainly more perfect than any play Mr. Yeats has written since *The Land of Heart's Desire.* No one else could have written it. It offers very little

room for criticism. In its own way, it comes as near to perfection as anything well can do. Any demand for more passion, more actuality, is quite beside the mark. The artificiality, and even affectation, that here and there disfigured the prose version, have completely disappeared. The thing as it now stands is an entire success. One can move all round it, examine it on every side, and on every side it presents a finished excellence that bears the closest scrutiny. Take it up, tap it; it will, like a perfect vase, everywhere answer with the reassuring ring of its wholeness. It is there for all time, a thing of joy to those who delight in the clean, fastidious touch of the poet who is also a great artist.

VI

COLLABORATION

On turning to the prose plays we are at once struck by a new note in them, a note that not the most careful modulating in the world can bring into even a superficial harmony with that of Mr. Yeats's genius. *The Hour Glass* alone, upon which we need not dwell since we have already considered it in its latest form, belongs altogether to Mr. Yeats: the others, though in varying degrees, seem to belong to Lady Gregory. Even in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, by far the best of them, the wording of the greater part of the dialogue is either suggested by her, or imitated from her. Lady Gregory in her book, Our Irish Theatre, has indeed talked of her share in the writing of some of the plays. "I, as well as another," she says, "helped to fill spaces in *Where There is Nothing*. . . . Later in the year we wrote *Kathleen ni Houlihan* together. . . . For *The Pot of Broth* also I wrote dialogue and I worked as well at the plot and the construction of some of the poetic

plays, especially *The King's Threshold* and *Deirdre*." [1]

Of these prose plays we may dismiss briefly all but one. Mr. Yeats himself has abandoned *Where There is Nothing* (1903), which was not produced by the Irish Theatre, but by the Stage Society in London. The longest of his plays, running indeed to the conventional five acts, it had an inauspicious beginning, and was certainly not worth that little chapter of unpublished literary history which it created, and which lies behind Mr. Yeats's guarded reference to " a plagiarist " in a note to *The Unicorn from the Stars*.[2] It was never a good play, and is not any better now that it has been entirely rewritten by Lady Gregory. It is her version of it which, under the title of *The Unicorn from the Stars*, figures in the *Collected Works*. What precise purpose was served by including it in those volumes is not very clear; and when it is remembered that no place is found there for that very beautiful poem *The Shadowy Waters* (first version), and for some of the early lyrics and stories, the mystery deepens.

The Pot of Broth (1904) Mr. Yeats quite wisely has not republished. It is simply a

[1] *Our Irish Theatre*, pp. 80, 82–3.
[2] *Collected Works*, vol. iii, p. 220.

folk-farce, written in Lady Gregory's manner, and probably largely by her, describing how a tramp played an impossible trick upon a stingy housewife, and so secured a dinner for himself and something over. On the stage *The Pot of Broth* might easily amuse a not too exacting audience, but having done that it has served its purpose.

We come next to a play which is the earliest in date of all the prose plays, having originally appeared in Samhain, 1902. Just what is Lady Gregory's share in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, I do not know. The idea is Mr. Yeats's, for he has described how it came to him in a dream.[1] Some of the lines, too, one feels are almost certainly his,— "Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart";—and the spirit that broods over everything is his. It has sprung directly out of a passionate patriotism, and is the most perfect expression of that passion I know of. The effect when one sees it, as I first saw it, acted in an alien country, is indescribable. There is a wonderful nobility in its pathos, and its appeal is deep and unforgettable.

The scene is the interior of a cottage near Killala: the time 1798, when the French were landing there. The old father and mother are

[1] *Where There is Nothing*, pp. ix–x.

talking of their son's marriage, which is to take place on the next day; their youngest boy is looking out of the window, listening to the sound of cheering in the distance. He sees a stranger going down the road, an old woman, and wonders who she is; but next moment his thoughts are distracted by his brother's entrance. After a little the young boy goes out, and the others are still talking of the wedding when the old woman enters—this old woman who is the spirit of Ireland, tired and worn, troubled by the strangers in her house, the strangers who have taken from her her "four beautiful green fields." They treat her gently and she begins crooning to herself, but when she speaks it is to Michael the son, and it is he whom she tells of her lovers of old time, of the men who have died for her. "There was a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die to-morrow."

Presently she gets up to go, and Michael says, "I will go with you." His father and mother try to keep him, but the old woman's voice is murmuring in his spirit, and her troubles are murmuring in his heart.

MICHAEL. . . . Tell me something I can do for you.

OLD WOMAN. It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes, will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that they will think they are well paid.

She goes out, and her voice is heard singing outside:

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.

The old mother throws her arms about her son to prevent him from leaving them, but he has forgotten this wedding of which they speak, he hears only the old woman's voice, and even his betrothed, who has come in with other neighbours, is powerless to keep him. He rushes out of the cottage and the father turns to the young boy Patrick who has come back.

"Did you see an old woman going down the path?"

"I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen."

We are reminded in a strange way of *The Land of Heart's Desire*, for though the plays are utterly different in subject and in form, they have a curious inner likeness. In both a soul is lured away from peace and quietness to something unknown, in Michael's case perhaps to death, in Mary Bruin's to we know not what. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* will certainly be performed as long as there is an Irish Theatre. Its appeal is so direct, so poignant, so stirring, that, in an Irish audience at any rate, it awakens an enthusiasm which no other play the Abbey Theatre has produced awakens. There is nothing else quite like it. Its freedom from bitterness separates it at once from any of those plays about which controversy has raged. As a stage-play it is a masterpiece; for it must be confessed that its full power and glamour by no means emerge from the printed page. Alone among Mr. Yeats's plays, it gains enormously by presentation.

I have now reached a point in these notes when the ground becomes a little uncertain and difficult to tread; a point I would avoid altogether were it not that I have striven to make this study as conscientious as may be. For hitherto we have been concerned with collaboration only in so far as it applies to works conceived at a period when Lady Gregory's

influence was already an established fact; and had its sphere of action been limited to such works I should have had nothing to say beyond pointing out that the sole result of any importance produced by this collaboration has been *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and that it is not primarily as a literary achievement that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* counts. The matter, however, takes on a quite different aspect when we find this influence stretching back over the past, exercising a sort of jealous tyranny there too. It is with a kind of despair that we turn over the new versions of the old tales, in which Lady Gregory's hand is visible in each alteration. One begins to suspect it, indeed, where perhaps one has no right to suspect it; but we know definitely, at any rate, for Mr. Yeats acknowledges as much in a prefatory note, that Lady Gregory has helped him to rewrite the *Stories of Red Hanrahan*. Now the wonderful beauty those tales once possessed lay almost wholly in their telling, as Mr. Yeats first told them in *The Secret Rose*. In the new version they are told as he, or Lady Gregory, imagines some old woman sitting beside her fire would tell them, and all that one cared for in them has gone. One of the best, and certainly the most characteristic, *The Book of the Great Dhoul*, has disappeared *en bloc*

—presumably because it would not go into Kiltartan.

It is difficult to see what they are supposed to gain by being decked out in this curiously monotonous, facile, and charmless dialect, which has neither the pictorial vividness of the Synge idiom, nor the beauty of Mr. Yeats's own manner. The Kiltartan idiom is distinctly boring, capable, in its so limited vocabulary, of expressing none save the very simplest ideas. For Mr. Yeats to express himself in it is obviously impossible. There are many passages in the original stories which it has been necessary to leave out altogether, and they are usually the most significant passages. Had he been casting the tales into dramatic form one could have understood the purpose of the revision. As it is, it seems as if they had been sacrificed to a mere whim. If Mr. Yeats has ever read Perrault, his literary sense must surely have told him that those little masterpieces of the nursery, Le Chat Botté and the rest, are masterpieces just because of Perrault's exquisite re-telling of them, because of the humour, the irony, the perpetual charm of a delightful personality, that have come into them—because, in short, they *are* Perrault's, not his nurse's. In the Kiltartan *Hanrahan* there is little, very little of Mr. Yeats. It is

curious to note how his voice nearly invariably seems to be drowned by the voice of his collaborator. Doubtless I am stating the case extremely, and I mean no disparagement to Lady Gregory's work which, in its right place, can be very effective: all I would say is that the qualities it possesses can never be made to coalesce with those that characterize Mr. Yeats's work. Let me take an example:

> It was travelling northward Hanrahan was one time, giving a hand to a farmer now and again. . . . He chanced one day to overtake on the road to Collooney one Margaret Rooney. . . . She had no good name at that time, and it was the priest routed her out of the place at last. . . . He was glad enough to go with her, and to find a woman to be listening to the story of his troubles and to be comforting him.[1]

To whom are we listening? Not, certainly, to a great master of style. To my ear, at least, these monotonous turns of speech, with their flatness and eternal repetitions, are in the highest degree irritating. They are all right in a folk-play, where they are varied and made expressive by the changing intonations of the human voice. But for the purpose of narrative! As a style, it is a poor style, without

[1] *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, "Hanrahan and Cathleen the Daughter of Hoolihan."

distinction; with neither the freshness and charm of the style of *The Celtic Twilight*, nor the colour and music of the style of *The Secret Rose*. It has not even the virtue of novelty, for it has not worn well; and after we have read a few pages it begins to sound stale as a tune one hears ground out daily on a barrel-organ. Let me turn for a moment to Mr. Yeats's original version of these stories.

We will listen to the cuckoo, we will see the salmon leap in the rivers, we will sleep under the green oak leaves. . . . Death will never find us in the heart of the wood. . . . And even if death find us, how will it matter? Even if the rains beat upon us, how will it matter? Even if the winds blow upon us, how will it matter? We shall have found that for which the woods spread their tents of green, and the stars light their candles.[1]

And now for the new version:

It is very near us that country is, it is on every side; it may be on the bare hill behind it is, or it may be in the heart of the wood . . . oh, death will never find us in the heart of the wood. And will you come with me there, Oona?[2]

It is a thousand pities that Mr. Yeats, who is so ardent a student of Blake, should not have

[1] *The Secret Rose*, "The Twisting of the Rope."
[2] *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, "The Twisting of the Rope."

listened to Blake when he says, "No man can improve an original invention." This curious, possibly inherited, passion for working over old material, becomes in the end discouraging. What is posterity to do with this mass of variants? The task of the future editor will not be a light one, and there is always the danger that the more beautiful versions will finally be lost.

Up to the year 1900, or thereabouts, nearly every alteration Mr. Yeats made in his writings was, I think, an improvement; brought them nearer to the perfect expression of the mood in which they were conceived. But since then the changes he has made in his *earlier* work have nearly all of them been unfortunate; while, on the other hand, the changes he has made in his *later* work continue to show the old felicity of touch. The reason, surely, is not far to seek, and lies in his completely altered standpoint. He is writing now out of an entirely different mood, and with an entirely different aim. The consequence is that he is patching the old work —and it needed no patching—with cloth of a different colour. The two outstanding influences that one seems to trace here are those of the theatre and of Lady Gregory's books and plays; and the fact that these two influences are in harmony with each other has made them all the more powerful.

I have but to add that I regret the ungraciousness of these remarks, which were called forth partly no doubt by that anxiety one feels on seeing a beautiful picture pass into the hands of even the most skilful and learned restorer, but more particularly because *not* to have made them would have been an insincerity. They touch, I think, at the root of much that is otherwise inexplicable.

VII

PHILOSOPHY

I: Life

MR. YEATS has explicitly rejected Matthew Arnold's theory of poetry as a criticism of life, yet, in a sense, all his own poetry and prose is a criticism of life, just as all religion is, whether its last word be for refusal or acceptance. That is to say, beneath all his work there is a definite philosophy, at first instinctive, but becoming with each volume more and more closely reasoned. His poetry has never that effect of an almost disembodied music which we get in such a thing as Ulalume, where the words have just sufficient meaning to keep the subject hanging before us like a half-lost vision, or a faintly remembered dream, with a line here and there to call up an impression of autumn, of withered, rotting leaves, of a dim lonely tarn overshadowed by haunted woodlands, of a state of mind corresponding to these things—the merest gossamer threads, barely strong enough to keep the poem from floating away into the unintelligible. Yet Ulalume, which

has all the vagueness, and little more than the vagueness, of an unearthly and very mournful music, is a work of delicate and highly finished art. That sense of hovering on some "misty mid region" between consciousness and unconsciousness, which it produces upon us, was precisely what Poe wanted to create. To him the aim of poetry was the evocation of a melancholy and impalpable beauty, a sensation of regret for some lost and half-forgotten happiness, with at times a suggestion of tragedy, horror perhaps, even madness or crime, which the reader's imagination will make all the more vivid because it has been left so indefinite. His poetry, delicate and unsubstantial as the grey dew upon the grass before the sun has risen, appeals to us in some dim region of the mind where the laws of logic and of reason have no meaning. It acts upon our emotional or nervous sensibility very much as the sound of wind on a dreary winter's night may act upon it, creating a mood of sadness, of foreboding, or of terror. The world that is called up is some dark, nameless star swimming in a black remote sky, and the creatures that inhabit it are phantoms, misty beings without flesh and blood, but knowing all the grim secrets of the grave. Ulalume is a supreme example, then, of a very rare kind of poetry,

which produces its effect altogether by an unanalysable process closely allied to magic.

Magic, or something like it, nevertheless, is the secret of *all* poetry in so far as it *is* poetry, and it is only because in Ulalume, and in a few similar pieces, we have suggestiveness unmingled with any other quality, that it strikes many persons as morbid, almost insane. From none of Mr. Yeats's poems, not even from the lovely *Cap and Bells*, which is his nearest approach to this kind of work, do we get such an impression. His effects are never produced, as the effect of Ulalume is produced, by a more or less irresponsible playing on some hidden unreasoning emotion, but by a traceable sequence of ideas, the application of a philosophy which a careless reader might be inclined to dismiss as vague and obscure, were it not that in certain of his prose writings we find it stated with complete lucidity, and reduced to a more or less ordered system. To Poe, whose mind was of an analytic and sceptical cast, his effect, and his effect only, was of importance: and this is quite as much so when he writes a lyric as when he writes a detective story. His point of view is essentially materialistic and secular; his "ultimate dim Thule" is represented always as the creation of a disordered mind. It is in an alto-

gether different spirit, and with a full sense of responsibility, that Mr. Yeats writes.

To invert a famous phrase, Mr. Yeats is a man for whom the *in*visible world exists. We caught a glimpse of his philosophy in *The Celtic Twilight*, but it is only in the *Ideas of Good and Evil* that we find it fully developed. That most original and, at first, bewildering book is distinctly calculated to awaken in the breast of an unsympathetic reader feelings of scepticism and derision, sometimes, doubtless, of contempt and indignation. "Il se moque de nous!"—I remember an infuriated French poet screaming at me when I innocently asked him if he cared for Maeterlinck; and that certainly is the impression that the *Ideas of Good and Evil* seems to have produced upon some of its reviewers when it made its appearance in 1903. Out of curiosity I have burrowed among the back numbers of two or three journals—a dusty and depressing task enough—and I find that several of Mr. Yeats's critics refuse to believe that he himself believes in his own theories. That we should believe in our theories seems, I know not why, always to be of infinitely more importance to the world at large than their truth or falsity. As a matter of fact, it is not in every case so easy to nail oneself down to a definite creed. As Socrates

long ago pointed out to his pupils, "A man of sense ought not to say . . . that the description I have given of the soul and her mansions is exactly true. But . . . he may venture to think, not improperly or unworthily, that something of the kind is true. The venture is a glorious one." [1] To a poet, above all, whatever appeals strongly to his imagination tends to pass out of the world of imagination into that of reality. In a sense he is not sure, and in another sense he *is* sure. A thing has only to be sufficiently beautiful for it to become a part of his faith, a part of his religion. This is what Keats meant when he wrote his celebrated phrase, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," [2] that has so often been quoted in support of a tedious and uninspired naturalism with which he would have had nothing to do.

Certain statements, however, Mr. Yeats has made in a manner so explicit and straightforward that we must accept them as final.

> I believe (he says) in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines. . . .

[1] *Phaedo* (trans. Jowett, vol. ii, p. 262).

[2] *Ode on a Grecian Urn.*

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.[1]

Hence it is that "our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven."[2] This is, as far as it goes, of course, the doctrine of Eliphas Lévi and the professed magicians, who mix it up, however, with an intolerable and absurd rigmarole of dogmatic statements, a sort of grandiose pseudo-philosophy compounded of pretentiousness and unintelligence. It is also to some extent Myers's doctrine of the subliminal self. Mr. Yeats is indeed only following Myers when he says, "I am certain that the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not, and that its commandments, delivered when the body is still and the reason silent, are the most binding we can ever know."[3]

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 29.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 49.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.

Closely bound up with this doctrine of the great memory of nature, is the doctrine of symbolism, which I have already touched upon in an earlier chapter. For it is in this great memory that the symbols are stored, and they are there associated " with certain events and moods and persons. Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the great memory, and in the hand of him who has the secret, it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils."[1] In this great memory time ceases to have any reality, and as we learn to draw upon it, or to gaze into it, as into a mirror, all life seems to sway between two dreams. The other world is very close to us, and " we can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet."[2] These are the beings we shall be among " when we die if we but keep our natures simple and passionate:"[3] while in this present life they are never really far away.

I closed my eyes a moment ago, and a company of people in blue robes swept by me in a blinding

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 65.
[2] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 136.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

light, and had gone before I had done more than see little roses embroidered on the hems of their robes and confused, blossoming apple-boughs somewhere beyond them, and recognized one of the company by his square, black curling beard. I have often seen him; and one night a year ago I asked him questions which he answered by showing me flowers and precious stones, of whose meaning I had no knowledge, and he seemed too perfected a soul for any knowledge that cannot be spoken in symbol or metaphor.

Are he and his blue-robed companions, and their like, "the Eternal realities" of which we are the reflection "in the vegetable glass of nature," or a momentary dream ?[1]

Just there we get the note of uncertainty, and again, in these following words, are we really listening to more than the voice of a "momentary dream ?"

I was writing once at a very symbolical and abstract poem, when my pen fell on the ground; and as I stooped to pick it up, I remembered some phantastic adventure that yet did not seem phantastic, and then another like adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. I tried to remember what I had done the day before, and then what I had done that morning; but all my waking life had perished from me, and it

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 235–6.

was only after a struggle that I came to remember it again, and as I did so that more powerful and startling life perished in its turn. Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become trance. . . .[1]

But whatever weight we are inclined to attach to any individual passage, there can be no doubt that the cumulative effect of Mr. Yeats's work is to reduce this world to something unsubstantial "that might suddenly vanish and leave nothing behind, not even a little dust under one's feet."[2] Through it all there speaks a deep personal conviction, varying in intensity, it is true, and in its expression of detail, but based, as all profound beliefs are, upon a temperamental demand; arrived at intuitively and not materially strengthened by reason. Argument, dialectic, is ever a secondary affair, produced principally for others, and only a little for oneself. It is a superficial embroidery upon faith, which is drawn from a deeper well, into which we allow ourselves from time to time to sink, consciously or unconsciously, for our soul's sake. It is as though we brought our philosophy with us, as Wordsworth thought we did, from some

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 248–9.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

former life; for no man who is born a pessimist will ever reason himself into optimism, and no man who is born a mystic will ever be happy in an atmosphere of materialism. In so far as we are able to choose our surroundings, we choose to live in that society, and in those places, where we can be most freely ourselves, most freely draw upon the divine wisdom. It is because he can come closer to God in lonely places by the sea or in the woods or among the mountains, that the mystic seeks, as a rule, to escape from the life of crowded cities, if only for a little while each year. "Nobody but an impressionist painter, who hides it in light and mist, ever pretends to love a street for its own sake; and could we meet our friends and hear music and poetry in the country, none of us that are not captive would ever leave the thrushes."[1]

And if the deepest truth is arrived at by way of the imagination, it follows that moments of imaginative ecstasy are the divine moments of life. "Yes, I shall send out of this chapel saints, lovers, rebels, and prophets: souls which will surround themselves with peace, as with a nest made with grass; and others over whom I shall weep."[2] Yet even when

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 146.
[2] *The Tables of the Law*, p. 27.

this ecstasy leads to weeping, it is better than a dull acceptance of "the light of common day." In Mr. Yeats's tales and poems it most frequently leads to weeping. It is like the tasting of some too potent wine which turns to poison in the blood. And always it seems to offer itself as a way of escape: always it implies the desire to escape. Just here, in my opinion, lies the weakness of his theory, in this disdain, this renunciation of the world we live in. One gets the sense, as one reads, of a ceaseless antagonism between matter and spirit, as if our life on earth were a mistake and spiritually meaningless. But the spiritual is "here and now," or it is nowhere, and if we, as immortal spirits, are sent into the world clothed in flesh, it must be because our life here, and under the conditions that our bodies impose upon us, is necessary for our spiritual development; and it follows that we defeat the divine purpose if we refuse that life, or refuse the world. The philosophy of Mr. Yeats, like that of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, implies such a refusal. "La Terre, dis-tu ? . . . C'est elle, ne le vois-tu pas, qui est devenue l'Illusion ! Reconnais-le, Sara: nous avons détruit, dans nos étranges cœurs, l'amour de la vie—et c'est bien en réalité que nous sommes devenus nos âmes ! Accepter, désormais, de

vivre ne serait plus qu'un sacrilège envers nous-mêmes. Vivre ? les serviteurs feront cela pour nous."[1]

It is the philosophy of rebellion, of the fallen angels. Carried to its logical conclusion it leads to anarchy, to the overturning of the world and of law. This is exactly what Paul Ruttledge preaches and practises in Where There is Nothing, and throughout the play, though Mr. Yeats has in some degree repudiated him, he speaks with the voice of Mr. Yeats. We must learn "to get out of the body while still alive"; [2] we "must so live that all things shall pass away." "Give me wine out of thy pitchers; oh, God, how splendid is my cup of drunkenness. We must become blind, and deaf, and dizzy. We must get rid of everything that is not measureless eternal life. We must put out hope . . . and memory . . . and thought. . . . We must destroy the World; we must destroy everything that has Law and Number, for where there is nothing, there is God."[3]

One is carried back to the rhapsodies of some saint of the Middle Ages; and from the very nature of the doctrines preached it becomes

[1] Villiers de l'Isle Adam, *Axël*, p. 283.
[2] *Where There is Nothing*, p. 86.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

nearly impossible to avoid this language of excess, of overstatement. Paul's idea of ordinary drunkenness is highly characteristic. When the magistrate expostulates with him for giving an unlimited supply of porter to the villagers, it is in these words that he replies; "There is not one of those people outside but thinks that he is a king, that he is riding the wind. . . . Think what it is to them to have their imagination like a blazing tar-barrel for a whole week. Work could never bring them such blessedness as that."[1] He might be describing the effect of some Eastern drug upon the brain of an initiate. Alas, the real drunkenness opens no flaming door upon the Infinite. This idea of any possible connection between physical intoxication and the divine vision is of all things the most fallacious, yet Mr. Yeats seems to cling to it with the innocence of the ascetic:

> And blessedness goes where the wind goes,
> And when it is gone we are dead;
> I see the blessedest soul in the world
> And he nods a drunken head.
>
> O blessedness comes in the night and the day
> And whither the wise heart knows;
> And one has seen in the redness of wine
> The Incorruptible Rose.[2]

[1] *Where There is Nothing*, p. 62.
[2] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, "The Blessed."

We have only to turn from Verlaine's early poems to the Chansons pour Elle, or the Odes en Son Honneur, to see what kind of rose really blossoms in the wine-vat: "incorruptible" is the last epithet one could apply to it.

Quite as unconvincing, to my mind, is the odd notion that finds wisdom in fools. The fool in whom wisdom is found is God's fool; he is never the village idiot. But in the original version of *The Shadowy Waters* it is a fool who gives Forgael the magic harp which calls about him the souls of the dead. It is the Fool who brings wisdom to the Wise Man in the original version of *The Hour Glass:* "When the life and mind are broken the truth comes through them like peas through a broken peascod."[1] In an essay called *The Queen and the Fool*, the fool, we are told, "is maybe the wisest of all."[2] "What else can death be but the beginning of wisdom and power and beauty? and foolishness may be a kind of death. I cannot think it wonderful that many should see a fool with a shining vessel of some enchantment or wisdom or dream too powerful for mortal brains. . . ."[3]

Here again, stripped of its poetic imagery,

[1] *The Hour Glass*, p. 31.
[2] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 186.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

we have a thought that has been accepted either for its unusualness, or simply for a quality of picturesqueness in it. Teigue, the fool in *The Hour Glass*, for example, is a purely arbitrary creation. We may say he has a certain instinctive wisdom, but we must immediately add that that wisdom is not his: it is Mr. Yeats's. For Teigue never existed, and never could exist, in actual life. He is but a reed-pipe Mr. Yeats has cut that he may blow through it two or three of his simplest melodies—melodies that gain an additional charm from the homeliness of the instrument. Teigue is all right in his romantic setting in *The Hour Glass*, but when he is brought forward seriously in the essays—and he is brought forward seriously in the play, too, I think—we cannot for a moment accept him. Incapacity for any kind of connected thought, mere mental weakness, which is, despite the beautiful words they say, the characteristic of all Mr. Yeats's fools, never yet produced wisdom. The idea is but a poetic fancy, a confused thought, born of the fact that a poet, an artist, a philosopher, is often absent-minded, and often not very successful in the practical affairs of life. But there is no virtue in impracticalness *per se*; though we may like to see it in those we are doing business with.

It is a defect like any other, even if it is sometimes a lovable one; and though the divine wisdom may now and then lead to worldly foolishness, out of foolishness no wisdom ever sprang.

The same air of extravagance, of unreality, everywhere tinges the mystic morality as we find it expounded in his pages. Like the philosophy, it reveals an aspect of the truth, but if we ask of it a revelation of the whole of truth it fails signally. For this reason, perhaps, it comes to us more convincingly, certainly more persuasively, when it is still merely intuitive, as in the poem of *The Two Trees*, with the beautiful tenderness of its opening lines:

> Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
> The holy tree is growing there;
> From joy the holy branches start,
> And all the trembling flowers they bear.
> The changing colours of its fruit
> Have dowered the stars with merry light;
> The surety of its hidden root
> Has planted quiet in the night. . . .[1]

As soon as it ceases to be this breathing language of the spirit, and seeks to clothe itself in the formal folds of a reasoned philosophy, it tends to harden into a dogmatism proudly at war with common life and human

[1] *Poems.*

nature. And though an emotion "escaped from the impulse of bodily longing and the restraints of bodily reason"[1] is sought for, yet even a life ruled by passionate bodily longing is implied to be better than a temperate, colourless life, because it is on the wings of passion, good or evil, that the soul passes among immortal things.

All this is influenced largely by Blake, and there is a sense, as I have said, in which it is true, for certainly the most hopeless state the soul can fall into is a state of apathy. "Life," Mr. Yeats says, "is not lived at all, if not lived for contemplation or excitement."[2] On the other hand, in its pursuit of a wild ecstatic energy, the spirit is apt to become blind, like eyes that have gazed too fixedly upon the sun, and to miss much that is beautiful and deep though unemphatic. The whole attitude, to put it harshly, is a little unintelligent, and the reply to this would doubtless be that the rapture, the enthusiasm of saint and artist usually *is* unintelligent. Intelligence is a subtle thing that very frequently makes for irony and epicureanism. It has a rare and peculiar beauty—it may be the most beautiful of all things, perhaps—but it is not the best equip-

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 206.
[2] *Collected Works*, vol. viii, p. 101.

ment for a Joan of Arc or a Savonarola; it will never set the hearts and imaginations of men on fire. In the genius of Anatole France we may see its finest flower, and has not Monsieur Bergeret said, "If Napoleon had been as intelligent as Spinoza, he would have written four books in a garret"—*Si Napoléon avait été aussi intelligent que Spinoza, il aurait écrit quatre volumes dans une mansarde.*[1] The great strength and the great weakness of Blake, and of many other mystics, is that they see one thing only, and see it all the time; that they are intensely narrow, and utterly unresponsive to anything lying outside their own dominant passion. One can never trust them, because the true and the false are so inextricably mingled in their minds that they themselves are powerless to disentangle them, and the thirst for vision seems unfortunately to drug the sense of truth, or, shall we say, the analytic faculty. That Blake saw the vision of the ghost of a flea we do not doubt: that his having seen it weighs at all in any argument for the objective truth of visions is another matter. The mystic will rarely speak plainly; his thought is too frequently hidden even from himself by the metaphorical language he loves to wrap it in. When in the middle of a

[1] *M. Bergeret à Paris*, p. 254.

scientific discussion Blake cries, "It is false. I walked the other evening to the end of the heath, and touched the sky with my finger,"[1] we take it that he simply means that science bores him. But when Mrs. Blake says, "You know, dear, the first time you saw God was when you were four years old, and he put his head to the window and set you a-screaming,"[2] something more is meant: but how much?—how little?

The whole of Mr. Yeats's work burns with this flame of spiritual ardour. One is carried away by its power and beauty, by the unfailing felicity of its expression, its splendid poetry, its magnificent imagery; and it is only gradually that one becomes aware of something that is lacking in it. That something, I am inclined to think, is largely ethical. In all these high passions one misses just the one thing upon which the whole *quality* of our spiritual vision depends. For, as his heroes seem to fail to realize, there must be a choice. The spirits of good increase the power of life, but the spirits of evil war upon the soul and, in the end, slay it. The human mind is like a pool that may become foul and stagnant,

[1] Symons, *William Blake*, p. 243.

[2] *Crabb Robinson's Diary* (published in Symons' *Blake*), p. 293.

until nothing lives there but an evil life of corruption which swarms below the dark, dulled surface. The mystic ethic holds that the soul and the mind are separate, and that the soul may remain pure while the mind is fouled and maddened. No doctrine could be more dangerous, and no doctrine was ever less proved, though, again, it seems to contain a sort of half-truth. "Go put off holiness and put on intellect," cries Blake, and Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes echo that cry, though in other moods Mr. Yeats may make a paradox about the wisdom of fools. What I seem to miss, then, in this spirituality, is, somehow, the highest spiritual beauty of all; the last fine charm and delicate bloom that I possibly fail to give any idea of when I describe it, for want of a better definition, as a kind of moral fragrance. The difficulty is that when one speaks of morality in art, people at once think of something didactic and aggressive. Yet a moral sense is as necessary to the artist as a sense of colour. To put it in another way, all poetry should, I think, be inspired by a spirit of love: and when I say love, I mean not only human love, but a love for all living creatures. There are a number of Mr. Yeats's lyrics that come under this category—*The Stolen Child, The Pity of Love, When You are*

Old, The Folly of being Comforted, occur to the memory at once—but much of his work certainly does not.

> Thus was man
> Ennobled outwardly before my sight,
> And thus my heart was early introduced
> To an unconscious love and reverence
> Of human nature.[1]

So Wordsworth wrote, and it is because his work springs from this love and reverence that, though it falls far below that of Mr. Yeats in poetic power, here and there it attains a height which Mr. Yeats does not often reach, though he *does* reach it at times. In the highest work of all the ethical and æsthetic qualities are indistinguishable. Why is it that a very simple poem about a boy hooting to the owls by a solitary lake—"There was a boy; ye knew him well, ye cliffs"[2]—why is it that this poem should create so profound an impression of a kind of still and solemn beauty, if it is not just that it is informed with this deep spirit of tenderness and reverence? for Wordsworth, assuredly, had no such music, no such imagery at his command as Mr. Yeats has, no such mastery of his art. Wordsworth's art,

[1] Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* Bk. viii, 275.

[2] Really a passage from *The Prelude,* v, 363, but published by Wordsworth as a separate poem in 1800.

I think, when it is great is great largely because it is founded on a conviction, lifted into the world of imaginative ecstasy, that in every soul there is a capacity for beauty, and in every life a capacity for love; because it is saturated with that mysterious quality I find it so difficult to describe. It is a quality which has no connection with style or construction or form or subject—though it may influence more than one of these—but is of the very essence of the mind behind the work, of its delicacy and depth; giving it certain finenesses of imaginative sympathy and understanding, without which its whole perception of life would be poorer, would be, above all, *different*—without which, indeed, a large portion of life would pass altogether unperceived.

II: Æsthetic

Mr. Yeats's æsthetic is completely in harmony with, and to some extent explained by, his philosophy. Long ago, in *The Celtic Twilight*, he wrote, "I have desired, like every artist, to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this marred and clumsy world ... ."[1] and in *Discoveries* (1907) he says, "The end for art

[1] *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 1.

is the ecstasy awakened by the presence before an ever-changing mind of what is permanent in the world, or by the arousing of that mind itself into the very delicate and fastidious mood habitual with it when it is seeking those permanent and recurring things."[1] Art is coming to take the place of religion, or itself becomes a kind of religion in being the medium by which we pass from the material to the spiritual world. And because, like religion, it deals only with eternal things, it can find no place, Mr. Yeats thinks, for "science and politics, the philosophy and morality of its time,"[2] these merely expressing the changing opinions of men, and growing stale in a generation.

The artist, therefore, will do well to return to the spirit of a past when men worshipped nature, and lived "in a world where anything might flow and change, and become any other thing; and among great gods whose passions were in the flaming sunset, and in the thunder and the thunder-shower."[3] Then "the hare that ran by among the dew might have sat upon his haunches when the first man was made, and the poor bunch of rushes under

[1] *Discoveries*, "The Two Kinds of Asceticism."
[2] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 299.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 279.

their feet might have been a goddess laughing among the stars."[1] "All the great Masters have understood that there cannot be great art without the little limited art of the fable . . . and the rich, far-wandering, many-imaged life of the half-seen world beyond it."[2] There is no place here for "the machine shop of the realists"; no place for the sermon shop of social missionaries. "Literature decays when it no longer makes more beautiful, or more vivid, the language which unites it to all life; and when one finds the criticism of the student, and the purpose of the reformer, and the logic of the man of science, where there should have been the reveries of the common heart, ennobled into some raving Lear or unabashed Don Quixote."[3]

Even what Matthew Arnold has called "the Greek way of writing," "which adds lightness and brightness to nature . . . but is without ecstasy," revealing only that "affection a man feels for the garden where he has walked daily and thought pleasant thoughts,"[4] can never have more than a kind of secondary beauty.

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 280.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 341.

[3] Preface to Synge's *Well of the Saints*. *Collected Works*, vol. viii, p. 176.

[4] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 278.

Thus Shakespeare writes in the Greek way when he writes—

> I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
> Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows;

but when he writes—

> Look how the floor of heaven
> Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold;

he is writing as men write who are "devout worshippers among the haunts of their divinities."[1]

Poetry is indeed, as I began this chapter by saying, a kind of magic, the poet a kind of magician, working by means of symbols, and by the weaving of a spell. The rhythm lulls us to that listening stillness through which, as through some tranquil atmosphere, the meanings and emotions and visions that are evoked float to us out of the great memory, the world-soul, for we are not really far away, though the imagery is so different, from the idealism of Plato, as Plato sometimes expressed it.

In the ordinary way, everyone knows what a symbol is—a cathedral is a symbol of Christianity, a policeman's uniform is a symbol of the law of the state. With Mr. Yeats symbols are of two kinds, emotional and intellectual.

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 276.

"If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion, at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margin, or of the lovers I saw there a night ago; but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality."[1] Naturally, since these spirits or moods live with a life of their own, and are immortal, the artist sometimes calls out of the deep "creatures noble or ignoble, divine or dæmonic . . . that he never imagined."[2] The world of Dante, for example, is no more "than a mass of symbols of colour and form and sound which put on humanity, when they arouse some mind to an intense and active life that is not theirs."[3]

The theory, as it comes to us winged with the wonderful music of Mr. Yeats's prose, has a curious persuasiveness. He returns to it again and again, with varying degrees of emphasis, but always with a copiousness of illustration that cannot be reproduced here, though as far as possible I have tried to give it in his own words. I have put it in its extreme form, in which it would appear to be connected

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 251.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 220.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 219.

almost with the magical doctrine of correspondences, and if I have dwelt upon it too insistently my excuse must be that it is the main principle moulding all his work. But even if we admit its partial truth, we may still refuse to follow his exposition in all its particulars. It is not possible, I think, to point out so explicitly as he tries to do *why* a certain poem delights us. His theory, from its elasticity, can be made to embrace a great deal, but does it really bring us much nearer to the explanation of the miracle that is wrought in the creation of every poem? There is always the unaccountable element left over, which *is* the poetry. Mr. Yeats's criticism is invariably a re-creation, in another form, of what he is criticizing, but a re-creation does not materially help us. If we take a stanza from *Tom O'Bedlam's Song*—

> With a heart of furious fancies,
> Whereof I am commander;
> With a burning spear
> And a horse of air,
> To the wilderness I wander;

how are we to deny its intensely poetic effect, yet how are we to explain it? how, if it comes to that, are we to defend it against anyone who cares to call it nonsense? Can we describe the "burning spear," and "the horse of air," as

symbols? Of what are they symbols? Mr. Yeats, indeed, tells us that sometimes a symbol of whose meaning we are entirely ignorant forces itself into our consciousness; that in dreams we sometimes are shown symbols whose meanings we do not discover for years. We may reject a view so precise, but there still remains the fact that certain words in themselves, or in association with others, *have* the power to produce upon the imagination a mysterious effect which it seems quite impossible to account for. To take a very simple personal instance; when I was a child the lines,

> "How many miles to Babylon?"
> "Threescore miles and ten."
> "Can I get there by candlelight?"
> "Yes, and back again:"

had a curious fascination for me, and would set me dreaming in a very vivid way if I said them over. The key-words are, of course, "Babylon" and "candlelight," but we hardly expect symbolism in an old nursery jingle. Or again, let us take these lines from Milton—

> Good luck befriend thee, Son; for at thy birth
> The faery ladies danced upon the hearth.
> The drowsy nurse hath sworn she did them spy. . . . [1]

[1] *At a Vacation Exercise.*

Here, to my sense, the poetic effect depends upon the words " hearth " and "drowsy," the latter of which certainly cannot be a symbol, since it is not even a noun. Nevertheless, the magic seems to work in exactly the same way as it does in the examples of symbolism quoted by Mr. Yeats. The spell is produced, as I believe, simply by a note of music to which a greater definiteness has been given by the fact that that note happens to be a word which has dreamy and peaceful associations.

Surely there is no symbolism in these lines from one of Mr. Yeats's own early poems :

> Away with us he's going,
> The solemn-eyed :
> He'll hear no more the lowing
> Of the calves on the warm hillside ;
> Or the kettle on the hob
> Sing peace into his breast,
> Or see the brown mice bob
> Round and round the oatmeal-chest.

Yet the pleasure produced by them is in no way different in *kind* from that produced by,

> Brightness falls from the air,
> Queens have died young and fair,
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye.

Even admitting that we get more emotion, even admitting that we get a different kind of emotion, because Helen has lived and been

unhappy already in countless poems, surely that needs no more occult explanation than the ordinary law of association, which works here in precisely the same way as we find it working in regard to Milton's "drowsy," and "hearth." On the other hand, if we are going to claim "hearth" as a symbol, the symbol of happy, innocent, domestic life, then we may say that all nouns are symbols—which is certainly not what Mr. Yeats means—and which brings the whole theory to the ground.

How far Mr. Yeats is from such a conclusion may be gathered from his belief that symbols come in time to live with a life of their own. In a note in the *Collected Works*, speaking of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, he says, "When I wrote these poems I had so meditated over the images that came to me in writing *Ballads and Lyrics*, *The Rose*, and *The Wanderings of Usheen*, and other images from Irish folklore, that they had become true symbols. I had sometimes when awake, but more often in sleep, moments of vision, a state very like dreaming, when these images took upon themselves what seemed an independent life." [1] Symbols become, as it were, immortal souls—energies making and unmaking the world. And as they grow more powerful they begin

[1] *Collected Works*, vol. i, p. 228.

to work among "the blind instincts of daily life," so that Mr. Yeats is never certain when he hears "of some war, or of some religious excitement, or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly."[1]

The whole, or at all events by far the highest, aim of art is to bring these spiritual influences into touch with the world, to enable them to manifest themselves in life. Art is no longer a description, but a revelation, an evocation. With the art of a Herrick or an Austin Dobson, it is difficult to imagine Mr. Yeats having any sympathy. So, too, we find in the few critical essays he has written, extraordinarily subtle and suggestive as they are, that he deals only with those aspects of his subject which come more or less within the boundaries of his own kingdom. "Il voit tout à travers ses idées." As one reads him on Shelley, on Rossetti, on William Morris, on Mr. Bridges, we see these poets in a light we never saw them in before. Of all English poets he seems to be most perfectly in sympathy with Blake and Shelley. Of Shelley he has written more beautifully than he has written of anyone else, bringing together the scattered rays of his genius as rays of light

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 245.

are gathered in a pool. His essay, indeed, is a kind of concentration of a diffused beauty, leaving out of account all the barren places in that curious world. Shelley was a singularly unearthly genius, and he becomes still more unearthly as we read Mr. Yeats's summary of his philosophy. He is the poet who would have "wandered, lost in a ceaseless reverie, in some chapel of the Star of infinite desire."

I think that as he knelt before an altar, where a thin flame burnt in a lamp made of green agate, a single vision would have come to him again and again, a vision of a boat drifting down a broad river between high hills where there were caves and towers, and following the light of one Star; and that voices would have told him how there is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images, and that this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul, disentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb and flow of the world, into that far household, where the undying gods await all whose souls have become simple as flame, whose bodies have become quiet as an agate lamp.[1]

I have quoted this long sentence in full because of its unsurpassable beauty, but on almost every page of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, where the essay is to be found, there are things

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 140–1.

as beautiful. We become persuaded, as we read his account of it, that Shelley's philosophy must have been almost identical with Mr. Yeats's, and we wonder why this should not have struck us when we were actually reading *The Witch of Atlas*, or *Alastor*. His mind seems tinged with the traditions of magic, and it seems hardly possible that one who had made so profound a use of symbols should have done so unconsciously. He is the poet of

> Desires and adorations,
> Winged Persuasions and veiled Destinies,
> Splendours, and Glooms, and glimmering Incarnations
> Of hopes and fears, and twilight Phantasies.[1]

He is the poet of "spiritual essences," and his ruling symbols of towers, and wandering rivers, and caves, and stars, and the moon, are reduced to an order of which Shelley himself assuredly never dreamed. Yet to my mind the essay remains by far the most interesting and suggestive thing that has been written about him, is in itself a kind of poem, with all the imaginative quality of creative work. The other critical papers are perhaps less subjective. Nevertheless, it is Rossetti plus Mr. Yeats that we get in this—

If he painted a flame or a blue distance, he painted as though he had seen the flame out of whose heart

[1] Shelley, *Adonais*, xiii.

all flames had been taken, or the blue of the abyss that was before all life :[1]

and Morris plus Mr. Yeats that we get in this—

To him indeed as to older writers Well and Tree are all but images of the one thing, of an "energy" that is not the less "eternal delight," because it is half of the body. He never wrote, and could not have written, of a man or woman who was not of the kin of Well or Tree :[2]

and Mr. Bridges plus Mr. Yeats that we get in this—

There is poetry that is like the white light of noon, and poetry that has the heaviness of woods, and poetry that has the golden light of dawn or of sunset; and I find in the poetry of Mr. Bridges in the plays, but still more in the lyrics, the pale colours, the delicate silence, the low murmurs of cloudy country days, when the plough is in the earth, and the clouds darkening towards sunset :[3]

and Shakespeare plus Mr. Yeats that we get in this—

He saw indeed, as I think, in Richard II the defeat that awaits all, whether they be Artist or Saint, who find themselves where men ask of them a rough energy and have nothing to give but some contemplative virtue, whether lyrical phantasy, or sweetness of temper, or dreamy dignity, or love of God,

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 70.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 73. [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19.

or love of His creatures. He saw that such a man through sheer bewilderment and impatience can become as unjust or as violent as any common man, any Bolingbroke or Prince John, and yet remain "that sweet lovely rose."[1]

Zola has defined art as life reflected through a temperament. Here certainly, in this criticism, is literature reflected through a temperament. Less than most critics, I think, could Mr. Yeats do justice to a writer with whom he was not in sympathy; and certainly, in many cases, he is apt to do more than justice to those with whom he *is* in sympathy. He has little of the patience that characterizes a really great critic, such as Mr. Arthur Symons; nor has he the same breadth of view, nor, I think, the same scrupulous artistic conscience. For he has praised writers who have very little beyond their Irish birth and their participation in certain of his own aims and opinions to commend them, and has been indifferent to others who have done fine work along lines that do not bring it into touch with what he is himself absorbed in. Where he is in sympathy with his subject, however, and his subject is worthy of him, he is always illuminating. When the subject is not worthy of him, he is only misleading. It must be added that there

[1] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 159.

are writers whom one would have expected him to care for, and who seem to mean nothing to him. Balzac he admires, and Balzac appears to be completely devoid of every quality he has praised in the writers about whom he has written, and of every quality we find in his own work. Tourguéneff, who probably has blended reality and beauty more perfectly than any other artist, and who had a beauty of style that comes out even in a translation, he told me he could not read. It is doubtless a desire that Ireland should have a literature that is responsible for his praise of certain writers, but, though the desire is admirable, this particular manifestation of it appears to me to be of rather dubious service toward its realization. Bad art is good art's worst enemy, and a spirit of patriotism, upon which all Irish criticism that is not based upon personal friendship or politics seems to be based, is but a blind guide in questions of æsthetics. Whether Ireland is to have a literature or not depends upon whether she can evolve an artistic conscience,—at present she has only a political one,—and this end will certainly not be achieved by exaggerating the value either of what has been done in the past, or of what is being done now.

VIII

THE LATER LYRICS

As a poet Mr. Yeats has had three distinct periods. What I have called the later lyrics —the lyrics of *The Seven Woods* (1903), of *The Green Helmet* (1910), and of *Responsibilities* (1914)—are written in his third and probably final manner. For it is not likely that his style, now as austere as any style could well be, will undergo much further modification. The symbolism of *The Wind Among the Reeds* has almost completely vanished. In a poem called *A Coat*, in his last book, he gives a reason for thus breaking with the past:

> I made my song a coat
> Covered with embroideries
> Out of old mythologies
> From heel to throat;
> But the fools caught it,
> Wore it in the world's eye
> As though they'd wrought it.
> Song, let them take it
> For there's more enterprise
> In walking naked.

But the break has not been so sudden as these lines seem to imply. Moreover, he has never really been successfully imitated, not nearly

so successfully as Tennyson, and Swinburne, and Rossetti have been imitated. Either he is more difficult to "do," or his disciples have been less skilful. Eleven years before *A Coat*, in *The Seven Woods*, we find poems nearly as free from "embroideries" as this poem. *Adam's Curse*, for instance, which suddenly softens towards the end, closing in a strange tender beauty that is like the white foam of blossom on the leafless branch of a blackthorn, begins with a bald narrative statement, plain as prose, plainer a good deal than most of Mr. Yeats's prose. *The Seven Woods* is transitional, however; one or two of the lyrics, such as *The Withering of the Boughs*, belong more to the period of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, while, in what is perhaps the most beautiful poem in the book, we seem to see the earlier style passing into the later:

> I heard the old, old men say,
> "Everything alters,
> And one by one we drop away."
> They had hands like claws, and their knees
> Were twisted like the old thorn trees
> By the waters.
> I heard the old, old men say,
> "All that's beautiful drifts away
> Like the waters."

Here the verse is as naked as may be, but it is more musical than the verse of his last things,

of *A Coat*, for example. It opens with a little of the stiffness of a Gregorian chant, but the short sixth line is a concession to the ear, and the singing quality of the last two lines rounds the whole thing off, bringing it to a full melodic finish. The poem is remarkable for a certain grimness in its imagery. It is like a Dürer etching. What a Düreresque touch, too, is in that masterpiece of personification with which *The Happy Townland* now opens!

> O Death's old bony finger
> Will never find us there
> In the high hollow townland
> Where love's to give and to spare. . . .

A poem printed in The Acorn (1905), and not republished save in the *Collected Works*, shows this transitional style perhaps more perfectly than any other:

> Sweetheart do not love too long:
> I loved long and long,
> And grew to be out of fashion
> Like an old song.
>
> All through the years of our youth
> Neither could have known
> Their own thought from the other's,
> We were so much at one.
>
> But, O in a moment she changed—
> O do not love too long,
> Or you will grow out of fashion
> Like an old song.

Here we have the very barest statement of the idea, absolutely unelaborated, unless in that very bareness, with its deliberate repetitions, we may trace the entrance of a new elaboration; but the tune is beautiful, while in the two first lines of the final verse there is an extraordinarily emotional quality, an effect produced entirely by the art with which the metre is slightly lengthened so as to shift the speech-stress, and release the cry of passion.

After *The Seven Woods* for a few years Mr. Yeats appears almost to have given up writing lyrics. *The Seven Woods* itself contained but a dozen, with a couple of narrative poems, and it was not till 1910 that he published another little group of verses, in the volume called *The Green Helmet.* These show a marked falling-off, both in inspiration and expression, and though we find among them *The Young Man's Song,* with its delightful refrain,

> Ah, penny, brown penny, brown penny,
> I am looped in the loops of her hair:

The Green Helmet is of all Mr. Yeats's books the one we could most easily spare. The *Flamel* group of poems is more obscure than anything else he has written, and that same quality of obscurity mars only in a slightly

lesser degree the others, which are brought together under the title of *Momentary Thoughts*. Throughout the volume one is conscious of a lack of spontaneity, a lack of lyrical impulse, a mannerism that was never before so apparent and that makes one think of Sir Philip Sidney's words, "Poesie must not be drawne by the eares, it must bee gently led, or, rather, it must lead." [1] In *The Green Helmet* poesie does *not* lead, and the writing is laboured and without charm. There are some of these verses that only give up their meaning at a third or fourth reading. Here is a poem, *Upon a Threatened House*, which when I read it first I took to be an allegory, but which I now know to refer to an actual house at Coole. It may be that it is quite plain to other people, but I confess that I cannot help still finding it a little difficult; while the abuse of enjambment makes one or two of the rhymes meaningless, and the whole poem difficult to read aloud.

How should the world be luckier if this house,
Where passion and precision have been one
Time out of mind, became too ruinous
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best? although
Mean roof-trees were the sturdier for its fall.

[1] *An Apologie for Poetrie* (ed. Shuckburgh), p. 50.

How should their luck run high enough to reach
The gifts that govern men, and after these
To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech
Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease?

In *Responsibilities* (1914), this obscurity has to a large extent disappeared. A certain bewilderment may be experienced by the reader of *The Grey Rock*, but only if he is careless enough not to keep the threads of the poem separate, which the typography will help him to do. For myself, I admit that the method of weaving together two distinct poems, one very personal, and the other a narrative poem —a method Mr. Yeats had already employed in *Baile and Aillinn*[1]—does not seem a happy one. It really weakens the grip of both, and I cannot see what compensating advantage is gained. *Responsibilities*, nevertheless, is particularly interesting, because it shows such a remarkable recovery from the rather feeble and arid *Green Helmet*. The poems exhibit a great variety of form. We have narrative poems; short gnomic pieces like *The Witch;* fables like the charming *Dolls;* verses suggested by passing events, such as the Lane controversy; songs like *The Mountain Tomb;* and ballads like *September, 1913*. It is intensely interesting to watch how through the

[1] *Poems*, 1899–1905.

hard ruggedness of the new style the individuality of the poet shows unaltered. There are lines, too, and particularly in that fine narrative poem, *The Two Kings*, which have much of the old satisfying beauty. What more perfect image of love was ever given than this ?

> She builds her nest upon a narrow ledge
> Above a windy precipice.

All the old beauty, yet with a subtle difference, is reborn in lines like these :

> Where certain beeches mixed a pale green light
> With the ground-ivy's blue, he saw a stag
> Whiter than curds, its eyes the tint of the sea.

And again, when the King has fought with, and is about to kill, this stag, which of course is no ordinary stag, but an immortal lover of his Queen :

> On the instant
> It vanished like a shadow, and a cry
> So mournful that it seemed the cry of one
> Who had lost some unimaginable treasure
> Wandered between the blue and the green leaf
> And climbed into the air, crumbling away,
> Till all had seemed a shadow or a vision
> But for the trodden mire, the pool of blood,
> The disembowelled horse.

This poem proves once again Mr. Yeats's genius for narrative verse. Straightforward, lucid, compelling, it is marred only by an occasional line of rhetoric, as when Eochaid says, fearing for his sick brother :

> If he be living still the whole world's mine
> But if not living, half the world is lost.

Such lines come like an echo from the stage, and the whole style indeed, with its much freer employment of enjambment, has obviously been influenced by dramatic writing.

At times, as in *Beggar to Beggar Cried*, the directness of speech is a little startling. Mr. Yeats is no longer afraid to bring fleas and lice into his verse, and in this particular lyric there is a line as bewilderingly, and I think unnecessarily, frank as anything in Whitman. Some of the rhythms are swifter than any he has yet created, and there is one song at least, *The Player Queen*, which comes with all the authority of an old masterpiece that has sung its way triumphantly down the ages. Something of the naïve magic of *The Happy Townland* lives again in *Running to Paradise;* and *September, 1913*, with its lilting refrain,

> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave:

is a ballad whose stirring patriotism, made poetic, lifts it among the finest national songs. Even a few of the poems that might be classed as occasional poems have a quality of permanence about them which such things very rarely have. There is this quality, surely, in the splendid concluding lines of *To a Shade*,

particularly in the last line of all, with its harsh masculine restraint:

> Unquiet wanderer
> Draw the Glasnevin coverlet anew
> About your head till the dust stops your ear,
> The time for you to taste of that salt breath
> And listen at the corners has not come;
> You had enough of sorrow before death—
> Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

I fancy that Mr. Yeats's poetry in the future will not differ much from the poetry in *Responsibilities*. It will be principally dramatic and narrative, with now and then a song, and an epigram called forth by some passing event. It will not have the beauty of the earlier verse. It will be less rapturous, less inspired, less filled with the "vision and the faculty divine." Its beauty will have what we find in most of these lyrics, a hard intellectual quality. It will be a little mannered, a little cold; and its colour will have something of the greyness of granite. For that declination from the highest beauty to a lower beauty, in which skill and theory occupy a larger place and inspiration and emotion a smaller, seems to be the inevitable fate of every artist, once he has reached his own particular perfection; and to the poet, one knows not why, it seems to come sooner than to others.

IX

CONCLUSION

THERE is a kind of criticism, or appreciation, which, "generously expanding" the artist's work "to the full measure of its intention," concerns itself only with what is of highest value, what is unique in that work; not blind to where it has failed, but passing over its failures in silence. It is eminently the criticism of Walter Pater, whose words I have just quoted;[1] and it is also the criticism advocated by Mr. Arthur Symons, though in practice he frequently departs from it. Such a method has obviously many advantages, not the least of which is that it awakens an eager curiosity in the reader, tunes his mind beforehand to a kind of enthusiasm which is extremely helpful; for to "know about" poetry, to be learned in its history and all its rules, is of little value in itself, to be deeply moved by it is everything. On the other hand, it has always seemed to me to possess one great weakness: it is frequently misleading. When an unsuspecting reader sits down

[1] *Gaston de Latour*, p. 68.

to Feuillet's La Morte, confident that he is about to enjoy a great novel; when Mr. Symons himself goes to Brescia, visits the galleries and has "the doors of many churches unlocked," for the sake of Moretto, ("I never tried so hard to like the work of any painter"[1]); they reap, in their disappointment, the fruit of what "something more than sympathy" has sown. I have thought it best, in the present study, to write in detail of Mr. Yeats's work, noting what seemed to me its weaknesses as well as what seemed to me its strength. And as I reach this chapter I am haunted by the idea that in the pursuit of a strict sincerity I may have reduced the colour of my picture overmuch, have understated my admiration; above all, I feel this, when I remember the enthusiasm with which writers of a very different calibre from Mr. Yeats are greeted.

It is the idlest of tasks, surely, to attempt to anticipate the verdict of posterity upon a contemporary writer, nevertheless, I am convinced that time will be this writer's friend. He has frequently been underrated, he has never, I think, been overrated. "Of genius," Wordsworth has said, "the only proof is, the

[1] Symons, *Cities of Italy*, p. 257.

act of doing well what is worthy to be done, and what was never done before." [1] From such a test the bulk of Mr. Yeats's work has nothing to fear, and of no writer can we say more than that. It is the work of the only great poet Ireland has yet produced, and if it belongs to European literature, as undoubtedly it does, that makes it none the less Irish. I do not say this because he has found his subjects in Ireland, nor for any of the reasons that would make me characterize the work of Synge, say, as Irish; but because it is intimately true to the spirit, not so much of the people, as of the very country itself—its atmosphere, its earth and its stones, its waters and woods and clouds. It is an ideal Ireland, perhaps, and one may say that the ordinary natives of any country *are* the country; but this land is somehow haunted, and it is this mysterious, haunting presence which, for the first time, finds a voice in Mr. Yeats's poetry. An effect of light on a bare road, the cry of a seagull passing over some solitary lake, bring a sort of quickening spirit into the air, a kind of lonely, half-desolate beauty that is the same as that evoked by the music of his poems. Take these three lines, with which one of his love poems begins:

[1] Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* (Oxford ed.), p. 952.

All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old,
The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak of a lumbering cart,
The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing the wintry mould. . . .[1]

There is nothing descriptive in this passage, in the ordinary meaning of the word, and yet its melancholy beauty gives the atmosphere and spirit of an Irish landscape in a way that no painting I have ever seen gives it. That with scarcely a hint of descriptive writing natural scenery can be called up, and kept continually before us, Wuthering Heights is there to prove; and to my mind nearly all Mr. Yeats's best lyrics—even a poem like *The Pity of Love*[2]—have a definite background of nature, which could not be made more vivid, and might easily be made less so, by twenty lines of carefully accurate description. It is rather odd that it should be so, for Mr. Yeats has little or nothing in common with those poets we are accustomed to call "poets of nature." He never writes as Wordsworth writes. In Wordsworth nature is reflected as trees are reflected in a river, but with a sort of added light that is the light of his

[1] *The Wind Among the Reeds*, "Aedh tells of the Rose in His Heart."

[2] *Poems*.

genius. In Mr. Yeats nature is suggested almost as much by the rhythm of his verse as by the words he uses. Wordsworth's landscapes have the coolness and freshness of water-colour, "the sweetness of a common dawn:" Mr. Yeats's are richer and darker, not more spiritual, but more *haunted.* With Wordsworth, at his best, literature almost ceases to be literature, because it has become wind or sunlight or the waving of daffodils: with Mr. Yeats nature is always subservient to his own mood, is there to reflect some state of mind or soul. There is something curiously characteristic in a story "A. E." told me of him. Some years ago "A. E." was teaching him to do pastels, and coming out one day he found the poet at work on a woodland sketch which he was doing from nature. It was in the full strength and heat of a July noon, and Mr. Yeats, while copying what lay before him, was turning it into a moonlight scene.

He is not a universal poet: his art does not come out of the whole of life, as Shakespeare's art comes, or even as Whitman's comes: and if we judge poetry by the breadth of the poet's vision of life it is possible that compared with Whitman he will seem a secondary poet. If we judge it, however, as I believe we must, by its intensity, its ecstasy, its sheer beauty

and music, then, of course, the position will be exactly reversed. If Shelley is a great poet, if Keats and Coleridge and Rossetti are great poets, then Mr. Yeats is a great poet also, greater, I think, than any of these. Even in quantity, if we compare his first-rate work with the first-rate work of the writers I have mentioned, has any of them more to show? has any of them as much? That scrupulous care for perfection which characterizes certain writers who are also artists—Rossetti, or Flaubert, and to-day Mr. Yeats—is often misleading; so that what we sometimes take for a sign of greater wealth in others is often really only a sign either of a lack of a critical faculty, or of an unwillingness to make sacrifices.

Inspiration rarely seems to come to Mr. Yeats from without, as it comes to poets like Wordsworth or Whitman. As it was with Coleridge, so it is with him:

> It were a vain endeavour,
> Though I should gaze for ever
> On that green light that lingers in the west:
> I may not hope from outward forms to win
> The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.[1]

When his work ceases, as in some of the later work done under an alien influence, to reflect

[1] Coleridge, *Dejection: An Ode.*

his own innermost vision, it ceases at the same time to be profound, ceases, in the real meaning of the word, to be poetic. We cannot deny that a certain aridity has crept into some of these later pieces. It is the punishment of the theorist. Theory, that Old Man of the Sea Mr. Yeats took upon his shoulders so many years ago, grows with him every year more vigorous, and will never now be shaken off. On the other hand, if we take his work as a whole, it is informed with a spirit of lofty beauty that makes it unique, perhaps, in our time. Where shall we find poems more lovely than *The Wanderings of Usheen*, than *The Land of Heart's Desire*, than many of the early lyrics? where shall we find poems more splendid than *The Shadowy Waters*, than the poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, than some of the later lyrics? And this, at least, I think we may claim for them, that they have a music which has never been surpassed, has never, to my sense, been equalled, by any poet writing in the English language.

"The man that hath not music in his soul can indeed never be a genuine poet. Imagery, affecting incidents, just thoughts, interesting personal or domestic feelings, and with these the art of their combination or intertexture in the form of a poem, may all by incessant

effort be acquired as a trade, by a man of talent and much reading. . . . But the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination; and this together with the power of reducing multitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by some one predominant thought or feeling, may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learned. It is in these that '*poeta nascitur non fit.*'" [1] The words are again Coleridge's, but none could more exactly describe the genius of Mr. Yeats.

In his whole conception of the art of poetry Mr. Yeats, to my mind, approaches more nearly to Milton than to any other poet. With both, poetry is sacred, something more than life, a faith, an enthusiasm, a passionate religion, that kind of enthusiasm for which men long ago went to the stake, and in the devouring heart of the flame saw the glory of God. Up to the year 1900 he was far more in touch with the seventeenth century than with any other. No one had come closer to Milton in his poetry, or to Jeremy Taylor in his prose. The likeness lies below the surface, for he shared few of their ideas. But it is there—he is of their kin, he is closer to them than to any of his contemporaries. One breathes in this

[1] *Biographia Literaria* (ed. Symons), pp. 167–8.

world, which was his true world, the same exalted, perhaps, for most people, over-rarefied atmosphere. Very likely he prefers the Elizabethans, but he is not of them, and when a touch of their earthiness comes into his later work it is because he has put it there deliberately. He would have been an uneasy guest at the Mermaid Tavern. The very fact that all his finest work could have been done, like Milton's or Taylor's, in the seclusion of a Horton, or a Golden Grove, is significant. And that work has a beauty, a strange bright glory, that seem to me imperishable.

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